

Discourse on Colonialism



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

Poet and politician Aimé Césaire was born to working-class parents on the Caribbean island of Martinique, a French colony, where he excelled in school from an early age. This won him a scholarship to study in Paris, where he entered the prestigious École Normale Supérieure and befriended Léopold Sédar Senghor, an African student and poet who later became the celebrated first president of Senegal. In an attempt to assert the voices of students from France's overseas colonies and denounce the pervasive racism he experienced in Paris, Césaire started a journal called *L'Étudiant Noir* (*The Black Student*). Its contributors included Senghor and Suzanne Roussi, another student from Martinique, who ended up marrying Césaire in 1937. Two years later, they returned to Martinique, where both of them taught at the prestigious Lycée Schœlcher, wrote prolifically in their spare time, and founded and edited the influential literary magazine *Tropiques* during World War II. The Césaires and the circle of intellectuals and acquaintances that formed around them used *Tropiques* to advance a Pan-African Marxist philosophy called *Négritude* and explore the implications of surrealist techniques in writing and art. Césaire's first major work, the *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*), brought him to international prominence around the same time (although he had first published it years earlier, in 1939). As a teacher, Césaire also helped inspire Martinique's two other most famous writers: the psychiatrist and activist Frantz Fanon and the literary critic Édouard Glissant. In 1945, hoping to help Martinique achieve independence or greater autonomy within the French colonial empire, Césaire decided to seek political office and was elected mayor of Fort-de-France, Martinique's capital and largest city. During this time, he drafted a controversial law that helped Martinique receive the status of a department (which is similar to a state or province) but also solidified French control over the island. He initially associated with the French Communist Party, and it was during this period that he wrote the *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). However, Césaire soon left the Communist Party, and in 1958 he founded the alternative Martinican Progressive Party. For the next half-century, Césaire continued to serve as Fort-de-France's mayor and took on a variety of other political roles in Martinique and France, all while continuing to write plays, essays, and numerous volumes of poetry. Even after his retirement in 2001, he remained politically active (notably, by protesting a 2005 law that required French schools to teach about the so-called "positive values" of French colonialism). Césaire died of heart failure in 2008, but he remains a beloved

and influential in Martinique as well as throughout France.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Aimé Césaire wrote the *Discourse on Colonialism* at a pivotal time in world history: World War II had recently ended, and much of the world remained shocked at the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi regime. At the same time, the victors of World War II continued to run global empires and commit crimes against humanity in their colonies. This contradiction was what principally motivated Césaire to denounce European and American colonialism in the *Discourse*. This colonialism extended back to the 15th century, when Portuguese merchants began establishing a string of trading ports around the globe and Spanish invaders (led by Christopher Columbus) landed in the Americas and began enslaving native peoples. This sparked the first wave of colonialism, during which European empires focused their energies on the Americas. However, starting with the United States and Haiti, most of these American states won independence in the 18th and 19th centuries. (However, this does not mean there are no longer any colonies in the Americas: France maintains control of Aimé Césaire's native Martinique, among others, and the United States continues to control Puerto Rico.) Great Britain began consolidating its control over India in the 18th century, but the second major wave of European colonialism did not pick up until 1870, when the nations of Western Europe began competing to see who could conquer the most land in Africa and throughout Asia. However, World War I marked a crucial turning point in European colonialism. Not only was most of the world already divided up, but the Allied Powers re-divided German and Ottoman territory among themselves, and soldiers from colonized countries who fought for the governments who colonized them began pursuing independence for their own nations. After World War II, with the foundation of the United Nations, global attitudes began to firmly turn against colonialism, even though European empires had never been larger. The second and larger wave of decolonization was propelled by the coordinated global movement of "Non-Aligned" or "Third World" countries who remained neutral in the Cold War. Césaire's call for global revolution must be understood in the context of this process of decolonization, which began with the independence of Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Over the following decade, the first few independence fights, like the immense popular movement in British India, managed to prove successful. However, when Césaire wrote the *Discourse on Colonialism* in 1950, most of the colonized world's work still lay ahead of it. Essentially all of Africa remained colonized, and European empires were bitterly

committed to keeping their colonies. Of course, Césaire focused his energies on the French empire, which reinvaded Vietnam and slaughtered independence protestors in Algeria and Madagascar in the few years between the end of World War II and the first publication of the *Discourse on Colonialism*. When North Vietnam secured its independence in 1954, a hugely important independence movement was growing in Algeria, which fought a bitter independence war that it eventually won in 1962. Having already granted independence to Morocco and Tunisia, France was weakened and essentially left without an empire. However, while some historians argue that the French empire formally ended with the independence of the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu in 1980, others note that it essentially continues today, both through France's informal control over its former colonies (especially in Africa) and through its direct rule of colonies like Césaire's native Martinique—which is officially a department of France—and numerous Pacific island territories like New Caledonia, which completely lack autonomy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although Aimé Césaire is arguably best remembered for the *Discourse on Colonialism*, the vast majority of his output consisted of poetry and plays. These include his other most famous work, the long poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939), a surrealist meditation on identity and belonging inspired by his move back from Paris to Martinique, and the 1969 play *Une Tempête* (or *A Tempest*), which reinterprets Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#) through the lens of colonialism and slavery. His poetry is compiled in English as *Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry* (1982, trans. Eshleman and Smith), and his other plays include *The Tragedy of King Christophe* (1963) and *A Season in the Congo* (1966), which dramatize anticolonial politics in Haiti and the Congo, respectively. Other important works by Césaire include the 1962 *Toussaint Louverture*, a biography of the Haitian independence leader, and the 1987 speech *Discourse on Négritude*, which was something of a sequel to the *Discourse on Colonialism*. As a teacher and editor, Césaire also influenced the next generation of Martinican intellectuals. The famous psychiatrist and activist Frantz Fanon, whose [Black Skin, White Masks](#) (1952) and [The Wretched of the Earth](#) (1961) remain cornerstones of anticolonial literature, was Césaire's student and lifelong critic. Césaire also helped inspire the prominent writer Édouard Glissant, whose numerous novels include *The Fourth Century* (2001) and many of whose essays are collected in the *Poetics of Relation* (1997) and *Caribbean Discourse* (1999). Prominent contemporary writers from Martinique include Patrick Chamoiseau, whose most famous novel is the award-winning *Texaco* (1992), and Raphaël Confiant, whose novels include the recent *Grand Café Martinique* (2020). These two novelists partnered with the prominent Martinican literary critic Jean Bernabé on the

volume *In Praise of Creoleness* (1993). Césaire's contemporaries and fellow theorists of *Négritude* included his friend Léopold Sédar Senghor, who is best remembered as the president of Senegal but who also wrote numerous books of poetry such as the *Éthiopiennes* (1956), French Guyanese writer Léon Damas, whose most famous book of poetry is *Pigments* (1937), and the white French surrealist writer André Breton, who remains best known for novels like *Nadja* (1928) and various *Surrealist Manifestoes*. Finally, the work of Aimé Césaire's wife and colleague, Suzanne Césaire, is often overlooked but also played an important part in the *Négritude* movement. In English, some of her work is collected in *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent* (ed. Maximin, trans. Walker).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Discourse on Colonialism* (*Discours sur le colonialisme*)
- **When Written:** 1950
- **Where Written:** Fort-de-France, Martinique
- **When Published:** 1950
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary French literature, postcolonial literature
- **Genre:** Political essay, anticolonial theory, Marxist theory
- **Setting:** N/A
- **Climax:** Césaire calls for a global anticolonial, anti-bourgeois revolution
- **Antagonist:** European colonialism, the European bourgeoisie, academics and the “civilizing mission”
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

(In)Dependence for Martinique? Although he called for an international anti-bourgeois and anticolonial revolution in the *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire also famously helped write a bill that helped his native Martinique become a formal department (an entity like a state or a province) of France, rather than an independent country. Some of his followers and students, including Frantz Fanon, were deeply critical of this approach, which they viewed as equivalent to selling out to the oppressor and sacrificing the possibility of political self-determination. Into the 21st century, scholars and Martinicans continue to debate why Césaire chose to advocate for departmentalization over independence and whether his choice was consistent or contradictory with his stance in the *Discourse on Colonialism*.



PLOT SUMMARY

In his 1950 essay *Discourse on Colonialism*, the intellectual and

politician Aimé Césaire makes a powerful accusation against “the so-called European [or ‘Western’] **civilization**” that reigns supreme in the contemporary world. This civilization, Césaire argues, is “*indefensible*” and must be overthrown by a popular revolution of the global proletariat (or working classes). Europe is indefensible because of *history*: from the 15th through 20th centuries, Western European governments progressively conquered the rest of the world through brute force in order to amass power and profit. During this conquest, they committed genocides and enslaved native peoples on four different continents. So speaking from his home, the French Caribbean colony of Martinique, in the aftermath of World War II, Césaire cannot not help but see the profound hypocrisy in Western Europe and the United States portraying themselves as the world’s saviors. They celebrate themselves for stopping the genocidal policies and imperialist ambitions of Nazi Germany and its allies, while continuing to maintain empires of their own and indiscriminately slaughtering the people they rule over.

In the first section of his essay, Césaire presents the fundamental contradiction between Europe’s professed moral values and its actions throughout history. While Europeans believe that they have brought freedom, justice, and “civilization” to the world through colonization, in fact this idea is a convenient lie that served to “legitimize [Europe’s] hateful solutions” to problems that it completely imagined. There is nothing noble about forcibly converting people to Christianity or stealing their art and locking it up in Western **museums**: rather, the concept of European “civilization” was an excuse for Europe’s savage exploitation of the non-European world’s labor and resources.

In the next section, Césaire points out that Europe’s “civilized” savagery was catastrophic not only for the lives and wellbeing of non-European peoples around the world, but also for the moral culture of Europe itself. Namely, because the European ruling class (or bourgeoisie) had to invent lies like “civilization” in order to justify its brutal policies, it corrupted itself morally, blinding itself to the humanity of nonwhite people. The horrific violence of the Holocaust, Césaire argues, is not an aberration in European history: rather, it is the *culmination* of European history. Most European governments pursued expansion through genocide just like the Nazis, and bourgeois European intellectuals—even self-proclaimed humanists—vigorously defended the same white supremacist ideologies that motivated Hitler’s policies. Césaire notes how French conquerors made a point of enjoying the rape and murder of nonwhite civilians, which further proves how colonialism “dehumanizes even the most civilized man.” “Colonization = ‘thingification,’” he famously concludes: it turns nonwhite people into inhuman objects in the eyes of colonizers, who then lose their own humanity by committing and justifying atrocities. Despite Europeans’ claim to bring “civilization” to the world, Césaire emphasizes, that world was already full of complex,

advanced, democratic civilizations, which Europe actually *destroyed* in the process of “civilizing.”

In his third section, Césaire continues this thread of argument and points out that colonial violence continues: the French have just finished murdering tens of thousands of innocent people in response to the Malagasy Uprising in Madagascar, and prominent French intellectuals actively defend white supremacy even after World War II. Responding to this unjust world requires building a new civilization that democratically uses “the productive power of modern times” to ensure that all people can access the freedom and human rights that European and American elites hoard for themselves.

In the next two sections of his essay, Césaire specifically calls out journalists and academics whose writings make them just as responsible for the brutal violence of colonization as the “sadistic governors and greedy bankers” who originally planned it out. Namely, even if they claim to be searching for scientific truths, colonial-era scholars—most of all anthropologists—ultimately serve as “watchdogs of colonialism” because they spend their days formulating the lies that Europeans repeat to themselves in order to justify their actions overseas. In other words, they have invented the myth of European “civilization” and based it on the self-serving idea that only white people are capable of legitimate scientific knowledge. Césaire looks at the geographer Pierre Gourou, who argued that non-European people were incapable of science and civilization because they lived in tropical climates, and the missionary Reverend Tempels, who invented a theory of “the Bantu philosophy” that made it sound like the people of the Congo *wanted* to be enslaved and murdered by Belgians. There is the psychoanalyst Dominique-Octave Mannoni, who asserted that colonialism in Madagascar was the natural result of inherent psychological differences between Europeans (who needed to progress by conquering others) and Africans (who actually have a “dependency complex,” enjoy being dominated, and are guilty of “collective madness” when they revolt in the name of national independence). And finally, there is the anthropologist Roger Caillois, who openly admits that he does not think that nonwhite people are capable of doing science or ethnography (even though, as Césaire points out, Egyptians invented mathematics and Arab philosophers invented rationalism). All these arguments are obviously false: they are not attempts to prove that racism is *true*, but rather they *assume* this as one of their basic premises, and then they use this assumption to justify European rule.

In his concluding section, Césaire returns to his call for global revolution. Just like Rome fell after overextending itself, he suggests, Western Europe is reaching a breaking point, in which its own excesses are threatening it with collapse. The peoples Europe colonized are, as of 1950, seeking independence and imagining a more equal future. And while the United States looks poised to perpetuate the evils of

colonialism through its economic dominance and capitalist orthodoxy, it is still possible for Latin American, African, and Asian nations to create a “classless society” that would truly provide them with the sovereignty, independence, freedom, and abundance that the West falsely promised them for centuries.



CHARACTERS

Aimé Césaire – The author was an activist, poet, scholar, and politician from the Caribbean island of Martinique, a French colony whose political and economic life revolved around plantation slavery for centuries. Writing in 1950 as the mayor of Martinique’s capital, Fort-de-France, in the *Discourse on Colonialism* Césaire reflects on the effects of colonialism and the political situation of colonized people after World War II. In the new global political culture, Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party has rightly become a symbol of ultimate evil because of its imperial expansion and the horrific genocide it committed against Europe’s Jewish population. However, Césaire notes, Western Europe and the United States have been doing the same thing for centuries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The problem is not merely that these colonial powers failed to recognize their crimes or formally apologize—rather, it is that they maintained their colonies, continued slaughtering the people they ruled over, and justified this violence with the same white supremacist pseudoscience that the Nazis defended. In addition to pointing out this hypocrisy, Césaire aims to explain why Europe reached this level of brutality and denialism, how European intellectuals who believe they are fighting for truth and justice actually end up advancing the interests of the colonial ruling class (or bourgeoisie), and what colonized people must do in order to become free—they must launch revolutions (both national and global) against “*indefensible*” European rule.

Adolf Hitler – Adolf Hitler was the leader of Nazi Germany and principal architect of the Holocaust, whose legacy Césaire addresses throughout the *Discourse on Colonialism*. Namely, while most Europeans and Americans consider Hitler and the Nazis’ racism, nationalism, and sadism to be an anomaly in global history, Césaire instead argues that Hitler’s genocidal policies toward European Jews were an extension of similar policies that other European nations had been implementing in the Americas, Africa, and Asia for centuries. In this sense, he argues that the Holocaust was evidence of colonialism’s “boomerang effect”: Europe had long since decided that torturing, murdering, and enslaving non-European peoples was a legitimate and acceptable political strategy, and most of the European aristocracy shared the same white supremacist prejudice, including anti-Semitism, that Hitler began to direct toward Europe itself during World War II. Césaire does not mean to minimize the atrocities of the Holocaust, but merely to show that they were part of a larger pattern of European

imperialism and genocide. In fact, the Holocaust was a symptom of an underlying problem that, to this day, still has not been resolved.

Pierre Gourou – Pierre Gourou was a prominent French anthropologist and geographer whose work Césaire sees as dishonestly justifying European colonialism in the rest of the world. Despite conclusive scientific and historical evidence to the contrary, Gourou insisted that nonwhite people “have taken no part” in the development of science throughout history and “there has never been a great tropical civilization.” It did not matter that these were lies, since Gourou’s authority as an intellectual made them seem plausible enough to influence France’s policy in its colonies. While he did recognize that France was developing economically only by oppressing the people it colonized, he never suggested that it withdraw from its colonies, because his “career [was] at stake.” Césaire cites this cowardice on Gourou’s part as evidence that even well-meaning academics are strongly influenced by the political circumstances in which they work, and so they end up perpetuating evil policies even when critiquing them.

Reverend Tempels – Reverend Tempels was a Christian missionary who participated in Belgium’s notoriously brutal rule over the central African territory that is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Tempels wrote a book about “the Bantu philosophy” that, he argued, showed that the native people *wanted* and *needed* to be ruled by superior white people. Although it had virtually no basis in reality, Tempels’s book was influential in Europe and is still commonly studied today. Césaire explains that, because it considered colonialism in philosophical rather than economic and political terms, Tempels’s book allowed Belgians to think of themselves as providing the Bantu peoples of the Congo with “satisfaction of an ontological nature” when they were really responsible for enslaving and systematically murdering these people. Tempels’s ideas show how intellectuals used “comfortable, hollow notions” of culture and ideology to make European conquest seem legitimate, even though it was really motivated by greed and white supremacy.

Dominique-Octave Mannoni – Dominique-Octave Mannoni was a prominent French psychoanalyst who spent two decades living in Madagascar, including the years of the Malagasy Uprising, and is best known for the 1950 book *Prospero and Caliban*. According to Césaire, like the work of Pierre Gourou and Reverend Tempels, Mannoni’s thinking is not only completely worthless, but it is actually a way of justifying European colonization and covering up the violence committed in its name. Namely, Mannoni argued that colonizers needed to dominate others in order to symbolically confront their parents and pass through “initiation rights” into “manhood,” while colonized people secretly wanted to be controlled because of their “dependency complex.” Mannoni explained revolt against the French colonial government in Madagascar as “purely

neurotic behavior, a collective madness” aimed at undoing “an imaginary oppression.” Césaire sees Mannoni’s work as an attempt to validate “the most absurd prejudice” and justify colonialism by any means possible. Like other colonial intellectuals, Mannoni invents ideological justifications for French empire in order to ignore the concrete oppression that it caused in places like Madagascar. Rather than admitting that his country was responsible for brutally murdering thousands upon thousands of people, he blamed Madagascar’s natives for somehow desiring their own deaths. Césaire sees little difference between this logic and the Nazis’ justification for committing genocide, and he takes Mannoni’s work as another example of how scholars willfully gave up on seeking the truth in order to become dedicated servants of the colonial empires that paid them.

Roger Caillois – Roger Caillois was a French intellectual who argued that non-European people are “incapable of logic” (even though they invented mathematics and philosophical rationalism) and therefore that ethnography must remain “white”—meaning that Europeans are worthy of studying other cultures, but other cultures are incapable of intelligently studying Europe. Although Caillois’s arguments are obviously false, Césaire notes that they were never intended to be taken as true, but rather to simply offer a way for Europeans to justify their colonialism. Caillois’s white supremacist thought shows how colonialism affects the power dynamics of knowledge: by claiming that scholarship only counts if it is written by white people, academics like Caillois justified colonialism as part of Europe’s supposedly universal quest for knowledge. In other words, Caillois’s logic goes, since *only* Europe can be universal, Europe has a right to rule the whole universe. According to Césaire, this is equivalent to justifying robbery by housing the stolen items in a **museum**: Caillois acts as though the knowledge that Europeans have gained about the world is valuable enough to justify the mass murder, rape, and enslavement of millions of non-European people around the world. However, Césaire does find one redeeming quality in Caillois’s thought: he does not openly advocate genocide, which makes him a “moderate” compared to many European thinkers and politicians.

TERMS

Proletariat – In Marxist analysis, the proletariat is the working class that must sell their labor in order to survive because, unlike their counterpart (the bourgeoisie), they do not own property. **Césaire** follows Marx in arguing that the proletariat’s destiny is to seize power from the bourgeoisie through a political revolution, but he also emphasizes that the relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat is inseparable from that between Europe and the peoples it colonized. Namely, he argues that colonialism’s central purpose was to

give the European bourgeoisie access to even more resources and low-cost labor, which means that it incorporated most of the non-European world into the global proletariat. While Césaire argues that Europe has created both “the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem,” meaning that Europe has *both* forced the world to become its laborers *and* taken political control over it, he emphasizes that these are different aspects of the same history and political struggle. In turn, the revolution to overcome bourgeois rule and establish “a new society” must be at once a revolution of the proletariat and a revolution of colonies against the colonizer.

Bourgeoisie – In Marxist historical and economic analyses of capitalism, the bourgeoisie is the class that legally owns, and therefore controls, private property and the means of production (the tools, technology, and resources necessary for economic activity). Because of this ownership, the bourgeoisie does not actually work, but rather pays other people—the working class or proletariat—to work for them. By using its economic and political power to make the proletariat dependent on the wages it pays, the bourgeoisie further expands its power and profits, which leads it to own greater and greater shares of society’s total wealth over time. **Césaire** argues that not every European is responsible for colonialism: rather, the European bourgeoisie has planned, implemented, and most profited from it. This bourgeoisie has formulated a progressively “more shameless” and “more summarily barbarous” culture in order to reconcile its conscience with the brutal violence it has perpetuated around the world in order to increase its profits. Césaire emphasizes that this hypocritical culture will continue to gain in power over time, until the proletariat launches a revolution that takes political and economic power from the bourgeoisie. In the 21st century, the bourgeois moral corruption that Césaire criticized continues to proliferate in European and North American societies. Some examples of this culture include extravagant and unnecessary displays of wealth, denial of climate change among the global elite, a preference for selective acts of philanthropy over systematic changes in government, and the increasing control of media and government by business elites whose profits depend on capturing new resources and ensuring that workers’ wages stay as low as possible across the globe.

Petty Bourgeoisie – *Petty bourgeoisie* is one translation of the Marxist term “petite bourgeoisie” (literally “small bourgeoisie”), which refers to a class with some property and economic power that lies somewhere between the proletariat and bourgeoisie in a capitalist society. Generally, this class politically defends, intellectually justifies, and culturally imitates the bourgeoisie (which actually holds the bulk of economic and political power). In Marx’s time, the petty bourgeoisie was largely a combination of merchants and writers, and in the 21st century, this would include upwardly-mobile small business owners and white collar workers (like managers, bureaucrats,

lawyers, and so on) who aspire to wealth and defend the interests of the ruling class. In **Césaire**'s context, the petty bourgeoisie includes Europeans and Americans who praise and promote colonialization, even if they do not have direct power over politics or stand to personally profit from taking resources and labor from Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Humanism – *Humanism* is a broad term that has been used to refer to a wide variety of different philosophical schools throughout history. However, all versions of humanism have generally argued for the superiority of reason to religious dogma and believed that humanity can define its values and future for itself. When **Césaire** writes about humanists, he specifically refers to 18th-20th century European (mostly French) philosophers who were optimistic about human progress in society and technology, which they connected to the rise of science and philosophy in public life. However, **Césaire** takes issue with the way these humanists, like the scholar Ernest Renan, saw the European colonization of the world and subjugation of “inferior or degenerate races” like “Negroes and Chinese” as integral to the progress of humanity. For **Césaire**, this shows that humanists were totally incapable of understanding the value they considered supreme: the absolute and equal value of all human beings. This shows how Europe used philosophy as a way to deny and justify the genocides, widespread enslavement, and mass dispossession of land and resources that it was busy committing overseas. In other words, instead of considering the moral consequences of their *actions*, Europeans took solace in theoretical *ideas* like humanism, without ever putting them into practice.

Malagasy Uprising – The Malagasy Uprising was a war of independence fought by the people of Madagascar against French colonial rule from 1947 to 1949, after France had rejected legal petitions for independence by Madagascar's political elite. In addition to capturing and executing independence fighters, the French arbitrarily slaughtered, raped, and burned down entire villages, which was not atypical of their behavior during the colonial era. Ultimately, in the war, the French killed as many as 100,000 Madagascan people, and about 500 French soldiers died. Writing less than a year later, **Césaire** cites this disproportionate body count as evidence that Western European governments treated slaughter like a sport or game because they did not see non-European people as human. Accordingly, Western Europe showed off its racism “in broad daylight,” which shows how morally bankrupt its culture had become by the mid-20th century.

Académie Française – The Académie Française is a Paris-based council that considers itself the highest official authority on matters of the French language and publishes an authoritative French dictionary. Membership in the Académie Française is considered a great honor for French writers, academics, and politicians. When **Césaire** notes that a member of the Académie Française proudly and unambiguously espoused

white supremacy, he is illustrating how completely racism infiltrated France's institutions and culture during the colonial period.

Bantu – *Bantu* refers to a large cultural and linguistic grouping of several hundreds of ethnic groups in Central and Southern Africa, which includes hundreds of millions of people (and about 30% of Africa's population). The missionary **Reverend Tempels**, who helped advance Belgium's colonization of the territory that is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo and enslavement of that territory's diverse Bantu populations, argued that there was a single, overarching Bantu philosophy that believed in the hierarchical coexistence of different life forces. Tempels's work has been widely discredited because of its essentialist characterization of Africans' beliefs and blindness to the diversity among Bantu populations. However, **Césaire** notes that its real purpose was never to faithfully describe what people believed, but rather to invent a theory of Bantu beliefs that allowed the Belgians to believe that their colonization was justified (namely because their life force would naturally stand at the top of the Bantu hierarchy).

Ethnography – Ethnography is a method of long-term, intensive fieldwork that is generally conducted by anthropologists. Through the 20th century, this almost always entailed white Europeans living with non-European peoples in order to study their languages, social structures, and cultural beliefs. In many cases, these white anthropologists worked for the governments that colonized and enslaved the people they researched, and their ethnographic research often helped these governments find more effective ways to control and economically exploit native people. Virtually all of the academics **Césaire** criticizes in the *Discourse on Colonialism* performed ethnography in one fashion or another, and **Césaire** specifically criticizes the white supremacist intellectual **Roger Caillois** for arguing that ethnography must remain “white” because only European people are truly capable of knowledge about other cultures. For **Césaire**, this shows how the modern social sciences are founded on white supremacy, as their original purpose was to justify colonialization by shifting attention from material oppression to the ostensibly egalitarian realm of ideas. By building academies dedicated to learning about native cultures and **museums** full of stolen artifacts, anthropologists and ethnographers have suggested that white people can have more legitimate knowledge about nonwhite people than those people can have about themselves, which justifies colonialism by suggesting that it is necessary for scientific knowledge.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



COLONIAL RACISM AND THE MORAL CORRUPTION OF EUROPE

Written in 1950, just after World War II and at the height of the third wave of Western European colonialism, Martinican intellectual Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* indicts Europe for brutalizing the rest of the world in pursuit of its own self-interest. However, Césaire also highlights how colonialism degraded Europe itself: by forcing Europeans to justify their inhuman brutality toward non-European nations, colonialism degraded the moral culture of European societies and baked racism into their core. This is why Césaire believes that, now, "*Europe is indefensible*": in an attempt to justify its colonial exploits, European culture has turned the indiscriminate slaughter of nonwhite people into a routine part of everyday life. World War II provided undeniable evidence of this; for Césaire, the horrific violence of the Holocaust was an extension of the nationalist expansionism, profoundly racist culture, and celebration of genocide that characterized European culture and policy for centuries. In other words, Hitler was not an exception in European history, but rather a symptom of the "morally diseased" culture, created by and through colonization, that continues to control the global order today.

Césaire argues that profit-seeking was the seed of colonization's brutality: it showed Europeans that they could achieve their goals by terrorizing native populations through tactics like genocide, mass rape, and forced labor. At the beginning of the *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire makes it clear that colonization's real purpose was economic. Explorers were "swindlers, perjurers, forgers, thieves, and procurers" looking to make a fortune, and they enslaved, murdered, raped, and displaced native people to gain control over resources. After they took formal control over colonized territories, European governments started using the same strategies: they institutionalized exploitative labor relations and justified brutal violence, up to and including mass murder, in order to protect their profits and power. However, over time, senseless cruelty stopped being a mere means to profit and started becoming the very *point* of colonization for Europeans, who reveled in the opportunity to completely dominate other people through senseless violence. Césaire offers various examples of this: for instance, he recalls how a French conqueror collected prisoners' ears as souvenirs and how another reported being "intoxicated by the smell of blood" while massacring women and children.

In order to morally justify the brutal violence inflicted by explorers and officials overseas, the European ruling class (or bourgeoisie) developed a complex system of racist, white supremacist beliefs that recast colonial rule as inherently good.

This blinded Europeans to the humanity of the people that their governments were systematically murdering and enslaving. Some Europeans decided that nonwhite people were inherently "inferior" and "degenerate," and so needed to be controlled by European "**civilization**." Others celebrated colonialism for giving white men a way to take out their worst, most violent impulses on nonwhite people whose lives supposedly had no intrinsic value. Regardless of which specific theory they chose, Europeans' strategy was to create a hierarchy of human worth, place white people at the top, and therefore argue that profit and power for white people *really do* matter more than the lives, freedom, and sovereignty of nonwhite people, whom Europeans saw as more like animals or objects than human beings. To this effect, Césaire summarizes the culture of colonialism with a famous equation: "colonization = 'thingification.'" This "thingification" of colonized people was the only way that colonizing European countries could justify their morally horrendous crimes to themselves.

However, Césaire shows how Europeans also "*decivilize*" and "*brutalize*" themselves by blinding themselves to the humanity of non-European people, and he argues that this aspect of colonial culture led directly to the most memorable horror of the 20th century: the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Césaire frequently points out that the Nazis were not unique: white supremacy was the rule, not the exception, in early 20th-century Europe and North America. He quotes several prominent Frenchmen who openly declare that white people are inherently superior to nonwhite people and should therefore rule the world—but tellingly, none of them provide any evidence for their beliefs. Even scientists took white supremacy as a basic assumption, rather than a hypothesis to prove, which shows how it was deeply embedded in 20th-century European and American culture. "Thousands upon thousands of Europeans" who had never met someone from outside their continent simply assumed that Césaire and people like him were incapable of rational thought or self-government and that it was Europe's destiny to "civilize" the world through violence. This is why Césaire considers European culture "decadent," "sick," and "dying": its survival depends on the destruction of other groups. Eventually, during World War II, Nazi Germany turned standard "colonialist procedures" against a group that happened to live *within* Europe.

Césaire saw the Holocaust as evidence that European political, intellectual, and military culture had rotted to the core, but he did not think it signaled the *end* of this culture. Rather, he believed that colonial violence would continue to dominate the world into the foreseeable future, most of all through the growing global power of the United States. Césaire emphasizes that colonialism is not over: rather, the globalized market system continues to function smoothly, as a "machine for crushing, for grinding, for degrading peoples." For readers who

live in Europe and the United States, fulfilling Césaire’s legacy requires speaking truth to power by insisting on the humanity of nonwhite peoples whose wellbeing is still frequently ignored in the political conversations that most affect them.



THE CONSEQUENCES OF COLONIAL PLUNDER

Ever since the Roman Empire, Europe has used the concept of “civilization” to justify colonizing places it has deemed “barbarian.” The word is still frequently used today, often to explain why so-called “Western” countries are wealthy and most “non-Western” countries are not. This common argument claims that because of the unique scientific, economic, philosophical, political, and religious advantages of “Western civilization” stretching back to Ancient Greece and Rome, “Western” countries have been able to “develop”—or grow wealthy and create democratic institutions—more quickly than “non-Western” countries. However, in the *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire bluntly points out that this argument is a self-serving lie: Latin American, African, and Asian countries are comparatively poor now because of *too much* involvement from the “West,” *not too little*, over the last several centuries. In reality, these regions were home to culturally complex, politically organized, artistically sophisticated, and ecologically self-sustainable societies long before European colonizers arrived. Europe *impoverished* the rest of the world rather than “civilizing” it, and the concept of “Western civilization” is a meaningless platitude that distorts history in order to prevent people in the “West” from taking responsibility for the systematic robbery of colonization and modern globalization.

Césaire emphasizes that, before colonization, the non-European world was home to several complex, organized civilizations that were at least as advanced as European ones. He cites Vietnam’s “exquisite and refined” courtly culture, Madagascar’s established system of “poets, artists, [and] administrators,” and the elaborate artistic and musical traditions of various West African empires. But these examples are only representative: virtually all colonized territories had established governments before Europeans arrived. These non-European civilizations were in many ways more advanced than Europe, which means it is not true that Europe’s power was the result of historical destiny: for instance, Césaire notes that Egypt invented “arithmetic and geometry” and Islamic philosophers invented rationalism long before European Enlightenment thinkers got around to those subjects. Europe conquered the rest of the world because of mundane historical factors, not some inherent superiority.

However, European colonizers destroyed most of these civilizations, subjugated the people who lived under them, and expropriated the material resources they formerly controlled. This accounts for present-day differences in economic development across the world: poorer countries have, in most

cases, had *too much* of Europe’s so-called “civilization,” not too little. In the second section of his *Discourse*, Césaire refutes the most common defenses of colonialism. For instance, while Europeans bragged about building “roads, canals, and railroad tracks” in their colonies, this infrastructure was usually built by slaves or indentured laborers and almost always served to help the colonial government more quickly transport resources and goods out of the colony. Similarly, while Europeans prided themselves on introducing crops like “cotton or cocoa” to colonized territories, these crops deteriorated the land and were grown exclusively for export, which meant that locals could no longer sustainably grow their own food. Of course, the profits always went to Europeans, so the development of infrastructure and agriculture were actually just more efficient ways of dispossessing and squeezing labor out of native populations. In turn, Western Europe’s modern-day prosperity is built directly on the profits it extracted and resources it stole from the rest of the world.

Césaire argues that the concept of “Western civilization” is the “principal lie” told by European colonizers and that it serves to distort history. Many people continue to believe that Europe is wealthy *because of* its so-called civilization, which implies that imposing Western culture on other places will make those nations wealthier, too. Césaire argues that the opposite is actually true. Notably, the idea that civilization must be Western only arose *after* colonization began: it justified the violence of colonization by falsely suggesting that it was good for native people. In other words, the idea of civilization is circular: European nations destroyed non-European civilizations, then portrayed the very fact of their rule as evidence that those non-European people never had a civilization in the first place, could not govern themselves, and therefore needed colonialism. To combat this widespread assumption, Césaire consistently inverts its language, using terms like “savagery” and “barbarism” to refer to Europe, which he says produces “the negation of civilization, pure and simple.” This is his way of pointing out not only European hypocrisy, but also the way that the language people use to talk about colonialism, international relations, and global development is loaded with colonial-era assumptions about what is good and evil (or civilized and barbarous).

When an interviewer asked him what he thought of “Western civilization,” Mahatma Gandhi reportedly answered, “I think it would be a good idea.” Like Césaire, Gandhi was well aware of the contradictions between the values Europeans publicly espoused and the way they treated their colonies. Just as the French converted Césaire’s native Martinique into a society of sugar plantations based on slave labor and the English orchestrated famines that killed tens of millions of people in Gandhi’s native India, colonialism has always systematically redistributed resources, power, and wealth from colonies to colonizers. Countries that developed after winning their

independence did so *despite* their colonial history, not because of it. While Césaire considers it impossible to know how non-European civilizations would have developed if colonialism had never interrupted their growth, he is confident that they would have remained “alive, dynamic and prosperous” rather than being undermined, robbed, and “mutilated” by Europe.



SCHOLARSHIP AND POWER

As a poet and writer, Césaire pays special attention to how scholars have participated in colonialism.

Contrary to their official roles as seekers of truth, in reality European academics deliberately generated conclusions that supported colonial policies. Specifically, to deflect criticisms of colonial violence and robbery, scholars blamed colonialism’s effects on “comfortable, hollow notions” of racial difference and human nature. In fact, Césaire shows, not only do these dishonest ideas continue to inform bad academic scholarship, but colonialism is actually foundational to academia itself. Therefore, beyond avoiding the errors of the past, thinkers must also account for their assumptions and social positions as producers of knowledge whose words have consequences.

Césaire shows how European intellectuals rationalized colonialism to lend it legitimacy, even when they had no convincing evidence. Césaire first looks at the work of anthropologist Pierre Gourou, who bafflingly declared that “tropicality” stunted the growth of non-European nations and argued that only white people are capable of developing science and civilization. While both these claims are obviously false, Gourou’s aim was never to find the truth: he merely wanted a job advising the colonial government. In fact, Césaire even suggests that Gourou knew that his scholarship would promote violence, since he noted that “economic development” for France would require “regression of the natives.” Gourou ended up fulfilling the colonial government’s will by advancing a racist argument that protected it. Similarly, Césaire addresses the work of psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni, who argued that colonization is natural because Europeans have an inherent psychological need to conquer as part of their “initiation rights” into “manhood,” while the Madagascan people he studied had a “dependency complex” and wanted or needed to be controlled by some more “civilized” population. Mannoni made colonization seem beneficial to the colonized, but only because he erased those same colonized people’s voices and instead based his theory on pure speculation and, like Gourou, accepted the unjustified assumption that there is an inherent psychological difference between Europeans and non-Europeans. Mannoni’s science did not lead to racism: it *came from* racism, and it was designed to help the French colonial government maintain its control of Madagascar. Gourou, Mannoni, and other scholars Césaire criticizes (like the Belgian Reverend Tempels) shared a common tactic: they explained

physical violence by making reference to *ideas*. (Gourou explained the inequalities of life in European colonies through native people’s “tropicality,” Tempels through the supposedly humble “Bantu philosophy,” and Mannoni through the “dependency complex.”) This explanatory strategy not only shifts blame off of colonial powers, but also suggests that material differences in power—like some people ruling with absolute power over others who are powerless, or some people being wealthy and other people being enslaved—come from people’s differing ideas and inherent natures, rather than some people’s self-interested decision to subjugate and control others. In other words, these scholars’ theories suggest that oppression is natural, acceptable, and unavoidable, rather than immoral and worth undoing.

By exposing the interdependence between colonial politics and colonial research, Césaire shows that a scholar’s social position can be as important as their conclusions: not only does it affect how they ask and answer research questions, but it also determines how their research is used after it leaves their hands. Through this analysis, Césaire explains his own project as a scholar who wants to be taken seriously while writing in an unconventional form and implicitly asks his readers to critically consider their own political interests and the way these interests might affect their understanding or interpretation of global history. Césaire specifically shows how the academics he critiques lose their own voices and become “watchdogs of colonialism.” For instance, the possibility that Gourou secretly saw the evil in colonialism only shows that Gourou consented to his authority as a scholar being used as an ideological tool. Similarly, Mannoni’s argument that Africans are incapable of psychological development was an indirect response to Madagascar’s budding independence movement, and his research was designed to help French people continue to believe in the benevolence of French colonialism when presented with evidence to the contrary. This is why Mannoni called the native people’s rebellion during the Malagasy Uprising “a collective madness” and claimed that their “oppression” was “imaginary.”

Gourou and Mannoni’s work not only loses credibility because it sprung from political commitments, but also shows how political power facilitates the creation and dissemination of academic knowledge. In a sense, Gourou and Mannoni could be taken seriously only because, as white male researchers, their opinions about the people they studied were considered more authoritative than the actual voices of those people. Césaire makes this point explicitly when he critiques the anthropologist Roger Caillois, who insisted that ethnography (fieldwork-based studies of culture) must be reserved for white people because, as Césaire puts it, “the West alone knows how to think.” By arguing that knowledge itself must remain in white hands, Caillois reveals how the power dynamics of knowledge both linked colonial-era research to imperial governments and made

researchers' claims authoritative, even when they speculated without evidence. In response to white European men's nearly exclusive claim to scholarly knowledge, Césaire offers another kind of knowledge in this book. He combines the innovations of European theory and social science with his own distinctive, poetic style to offer an argument that is neither linear nor metaphorical. The form of Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* allows him to propose an alternative way of knowing that relies on the rhetorical strategies of poetry and cultural analysis of living as a black man in a white culture, all while underlining the way that scholars abuse the illusion of certainty to pass off ideology as fact.

Césaire shows contemporary scholars why academia's colonial roots affect all of the knowledge they produce. This does not make all of their work pointless: rather, it means that they must critically examine the history of the ideas they reproduce and recognize that, as researchers, they are ethically responsible for the effects of their arguments and the biases they transmit.



CLASS STRUGGLE AND REVOLUTION

While he focuses on European colonialism in this book, Césaire also insists that this colonialism cannot be understood independently of its origins in and contributions to *capitalism*, the profit-oriented system of private ownership over resources, property, and technology (or, collectively, the “means of production”) that has dominated the global economy for several centuries. In turn, according to Césaire's Marxist view of history and social change, stopping colonialism is impossible without stopping capitalism, which is why he sees anticolonial independence movements and the revolution of the proletariat as one and the same. While he emphasizes that it is impossible to turn back the clock and undo the damage of colonialism, Césaire ultimately concludes that the anticolonial, anticapitalist revolution must build a society based on the social and moral principles of precolonial, non-European societies while continuing to advance technologically and materially.

Césaire analyzes the rise and dominance of colonialism through a Marxist lens, which leads him to conclude that colonialism is evil for the same reason as capitalism: it concentrates all power in the hands of a small elite (the bourgeoisie), which uses that power to systematically exploit the rest of society (the proletariat). Specifically, he uses an analytical method called historical materialism, which means that he explains colonialism's social, cultural, and philosophical dynamics by analyzing their relationship to material differences in power and wealth. Although Césaire talks about Europe as a single collective entity when he blames it for destroying the rest of the world, at times he clarifies that the common people of Europe cannot truly be held accountable for colonialism: rather, governments and the bourgeoisie (or the ruling class of property owners who stand to profit from colonial ventures)

are fully responsible for its evil. Ultimately, then, Césaire sees colonization in terms of class conflict: a small elite that controls most of society's wealth and power (the bourgeoisie) exploits everyone else (the proletariat) for their own self-interest. It just so happens that the bourgeoisie of Europe is exploiting the *whole world's* proletariat (including Europe's own).

Because he analyzes colonialism and capitalism as one and the same, Césaire sees both as intrinsically unstable: they worsen over time, but they will eventually come to an end. Similarly, he thinks that colonialism degrades Europe's moral culture because it degrades the members of the bourgeoisie as individuals by making them numb to the feelings, experiences, and interests of the people they exploit and oppress. Since they control most of society as a whole, the degradation of bourgeois culture essentially is the degradation of European culture—in other words, the bourgeoisie spreads its affliction to the rest of the society. Césaire believes that this process of degradation worsens over time, because the bourgeoisie grows “more shameless” and “more summarily barbarous” over time, as its culture becomes more and more accustomed to inflicting cruelty on others. This is why he compares the “capitalist society” that this creates to “a beast” that “sows death”: capitalism squeezes more and more labor out of the majority of society and takes more and more resources out of the earth, while the gap between rich and poor progressively widens. At a certain point, Césaire continues, this cycle of increasing brutality means that capitalism and colonialism inevitably lead to fascism and mass murder. In fact, he thinks the pressure will gradually build up until the masses (whether the working people in a sovereign country or the colonized people in a territory) overthrow the ruling class.

For Césaire, the revolution against colonial rule and the revolution against capitalism are the same fight. It is impossible to revert to a time before colonialism, but revolutionaries can seek to build “a new society” that is “rich with all the productive power of modern times” but also “warm with all the fraternity of olden days.” What Césaire means by this is that the classless, communist, anticolonial society he envisions will see progress both in terms of values and in terms of technology. It will adopt the values of the communal and “courteous” pre-colonial civilizations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, while continuing the technological advancement that began accelerating under the globalizing capitalism of the 17th through 20th centuries. Controlled more democratically, this technology has the potential to reduce oppression and suffering across the globe, rather than oppress some people so that others can profit. Notably, then, unlike many contemporary thinkers and despite his belief that capitalism was getting more and more cruel over time, Césaire continued to believe in historical progress. The way to achieve this progress, according to Césaire, was for colonized people to overthrow the colonial governments that oppressed them and establish their own democratic societies.

While this seems like the obvious next step in retrospect, it is important to remember that Césaire was writing in 1950, when the first few colonies (like India and Pakistan, the Philippines, and Indonesia) were beginning to win independence from Europe after World War II. The Algerian War of Independence, which catalyzed a period of rapid decolonization in the French empire, did not start until 1954 and lasted until 1962; much of Africa and Asia remained colonized into the 1970s, and Césaire’s native Martinique remains a French colony into the 21st century. Therefore, Césaire was completely serious when he called for revolutionary wars in this book and associated decolonization, peaceful or violent, with the next stage in the development of the human species. Although he recognized that decolonization would be an exceedingly difficult task, Césaire was also optimistic about it. In fact, he believed that the “new society” he sought was on the horizon: specifically, he looked to the Soviet Union as a paragon of radical equality and popular unity. However, Césaire would leave the French Communist Party just a few years after publishing the *Discourse on Colonialism* precisely because of growing disagreements with the Soviet Union, and his dream remains yet to be fulfilled.

are not only being historically inaccurate, but also defending a white supremacist idea that has justified colonialism, genocide, and terrorism for centuries. Accordingly, to point out how Europeans used the concept of “civilization” as a cover for violence, Césaire carefully inverts the usual geographical associations of “barbarism” (which is actually European) and “civilization” (which properly belongs to the rest of the world), but maintains the value judgments that are usually tied to them: “civilization” is moral and “barbarism” is evil. His strategy also shows how Europeans and North Americans—including, potentially, his readers—continue using these white supremacist concepts to implicitly praise colonialism, often without understanding the full implications of what they are saying.



THE MUSEUM

When Césaire addresses the rhetorical strategies of intellectuals like Roger Caillois, he uses museums to represent how Europeans justify colonialism by replacing reality with ideas. Caillois insists that European people can form legitimate conclusions about other cultures through ethnography, while nonwhite people are inherently unable to form scientific knowledge about any culture, including their own. Of course, Caillois’s absurd argument ironically appeals to pure racist prejudice, rather than any verifiable fact, in its attempt to show that rational science should be exclusively white. Because he places so much value in white people’s knowledge, Césaire notes, Caillois concludes that colonialism is worth the cost because it has led to the formation of anthropology as a discipline and the creation of museums about colonized people’s culture in European capitals like Paris. Césaire sees this as emblematic of the way European intellectuals look past the material effects of the conquests and genocides conducted by their governments in order to suggest that knowledge—which they prize above all else—justifies the horrible human cost. Museums exemplify this because they allow colonial oppressors to claim ownership over and pride in the same cultures they are busy oppressing at the same time. Museums are only possible when one culture systematically steals the creations of another, and they make the power differences that define intercultural “contact” in the real world totally invisible by presenting living, breathing, and often struggling cultures through the lens of material objects they have left behind. This is all enabled by Caillois’s assumption that white people’s knowledge is more important than nonwhite people’s lives. Césaire says that rather than killing people to build a museum for them, “Europe would have done better to tolerate the non-European **civilizations** at its side, leaving them alive, dynamic and prosperous, whole and not mutilated.”



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



CIVILIZATION AND BARBARISM

In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire draws on the symbolic meanings of a pair of terms to illustrate his view of colonialism and its impacts on the world. The word *civilization* generally symbolizes goodness and virtue, while the word *barbarism* represents evil and chaos. Césaire argues that the white supremacist idea that European “civilization” is superior to the rest of the world’s “barbarism” has caused and justified a colossal amount of violence throughout history. Césaire intentionally flips the script: he contrasts the complex, developed “civilizations” that once ruled most of the world with the “barbarism” of the European invaders who destroyed them. Since Ancient Greece, when Greeks considered themselves “civilized” and all non-Greek foreigners “barbarians,” these two terms have explicitly combined the opposition between Europe and the rest of the world with the value judgment that certain (“civilized”) people and nations are superior to other (“barbarian”) ones. In Césaire’s time, many Europeans simply assumed that European intervention would inherently “civilize”—or improve—the rest of the world. While celebrating this so-called “civilization,” however, European governments were destroying the democratic societies that *already existed* in those other places. This continues today: when people argue that “Western civilization” is uniquely free and democratic, they



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Monthly Review Press edition of *Discourse on Colonialism* published in 2001.

Section 1 Quotes

●● A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a sick civilization.

A civilization that plays fast and loose with its principles is a dying civilization.

The fact is that the so-called European civilization—“Western” civilization—as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of “reason” or before the bar of “conscience”; and that, increasingly, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less and less likely to deceive.

Europe is indefensible.

Apparently that is the conclusion the American strategists are whispering to each other.

That in itself is not serious.

What is serious is that “Europe” is morally, spiritually indefensible.


And today the indictment is brought against it not by the European masses alone, but on a world scale, by tens and tens of millions of men who, from the depths of slavery, set themselves up as judges.

its people, and expropriated its resources since the 15th century, it inexplicably claims to have been “civilizing” and improving that same world by introducing it to “reason” and “conscience” the whole time. This contradiction, according to Césaire, has created a dissonance within Europe that gradually pushed it toward collapse: it justified ever-greater brutality in the name of an ever-greater freedom and justice that never arrived. And secondly, Césaire sees this exploitation as intrinsically tied to capitalism: European colonialism began because the European elite (or bourgeoisie) was looking for new ways to profit and amass wealth, and the violence of colonization has always been a strategy for this bourgeoisie to make money. As an economic policy, colonialism has been dreadfully effective: even today, Europe’s palaces and museums are full of gold, art, and artifacts stolen from the Americas, Africa, and Asia. For both of these reasons—its moral hypocrisy and its outlandish theft—Europe is *morally* indefensible.

When he says “*Europe is indefensible*,” however, Césaire means it as a double-entendre: he is also referring to its literal military indefensibility during World War II and its implied indefensibility from the forces of Communism during the early days of the Cold War. The United States began taking more and more drastic steps to stop Communism throughout the world, which was actually a continuation of the same colonial logic that Césaire is critiquing: the United States talks about the protection of its ruling class’s private economic interests as though this were actually in the public interest, just as Europe claimed for centuries that colonialism was designed to benefit the colonized.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 31-2

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of the *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire does not mince words: his purpose in this essay is to formally accuse European colonialism of creating a problem that it refuses to acknowledge or resolve, which has led it to the brink of internal collapse. His argument is complex, but it has a few different central components. First, there is the contradiction between Europe’s actions and its ideology: while Europe has conquered the rest of the world, enslaved


●● Colonization and civilization?

In dealing with this subject, the commonest curse is to be the dupe in good faith of a collective hypocrisy that cleverly misrepresents problems, the better to legitimize the hateful solutions provided for them.

In other words, the essential thing here is to see clearly, to think clearly—that is, dangerously—and to answer clearly the innocent first question: what, fundamentally, is colonization? To agree on what it is not: neither evangelization nor philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. To admit once and for all, without flinching at the consequences, that the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 32-3

Explanation and Analysis

Césaire argues that the concept of “Western civilization” is a dangerous lie designed to protect European economic interests by rewriting history. In fact, this is not a mere untruth: it is the *opposite* of the truth, which is that Europe actively *underdeveloped* the world by taking its resources, destroying its existing civilizations, forcing its people to work in unfree conditions, and leaving it in shambles. In other words, European colonialism was motivated by economics and nothing else; the notion of benevolent “Western civilization,” which is still taught in schools today, was invented to cover up these true motives and help Europeans (and Americans, Australians, and so on) believe that their countries are wealthy because they are morally superior, and not because they have ruthlessly robbed the rest of the world’s capital, labor, and natural resources for the last several centuries. Colonialism had numerous economic advantages for the self-interested European businesspeople and nations who directed it: beyond eliminating potential political and economic competitors in the rest of the world, it also turned that world into a pool of labor and capital, as well as an ever-larger market for its

goods.


●● I ask the following question: has colonization really *placed civilizations in contact*? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of *establishing contact*, was it the best?

I answer *no*.

And I say that between *colonization* and *civilization* there is an infinite distance; that out of all the colonial expeditions that have been undertaken, out of all the colonial statutes that have been drawn up, out of all the memoranda that have been dispatched by all the ministries, there could not come a single human value.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 33-4

Explanation and Analysis


Césaire examines the principal European justification for colonialism: the idea that it “civilized” the people it affected and created innovation by “*plac[ing] civilizations in contact*.” The first is an obvious lie: non-European civilizations were in many ways more technologically advanced and culturally refined than the European ones who colonized them, and colonialism’s purpose was never to benevolently teach manners to non-Europeans (rather, it was to ruthlessly exploit them). The second idea (the notion of “*plac[ing] civilizations in contact*”) contains a grain of truth, but Césaire emphasizes that this does not justify it: had Europeans simply wanted to combine their ideas with those of other civilizations, they could have traded or held a conference, sent diplomats or collaborated on artistic and scientific projects. But nobody would sincerely believe that this innocuous cultural fusion was the purpose of colonialism.


Ultimately, then, Césaire turns the rationalization for colonialism on its head: colonization is the *opposite* of civilization, because essentially all it created was profit, while most of what it destroyed—people’s lives, communities, families, cultural traditions, and so on—had actual “human value.”

Section 2 Quotes

☞ First we must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and “interrogated,” all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward *savagery*.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35-6


Explanation and Analysis

Césaire insists that European colonization, the brainchild of a small European elite, was not just dreadful for the countries that were colonized: it has also been a nightmare for the rest of Europe, which has had to cope with the horrific crimes of its leaders. How can citizens explain why the government it has elected chooses to rape, torture, and murder people whom it is supposed to protect? Is it possible for citizens to accept this without also accepting that they, themselves, are also therefore vulnerable to such abuses of power? The only way for citizens to understand this violence is to draw a sharp line between “us”—the true citizens whom the government protects—and “them”—the colonized people who have no human rights and can be forced to labor at the government’s whim. This sharp line is always almost a racial one and almost always serves to dehumanize the nonwhite colonized population in the eyes of the white citizens. As a result, in order to justify this arrangement, the European colonial government plants the seed of “racial pride” in its white citizens, who learn to see themselves as inherently superior to the colonized nonwhite people who live overseas. In other words,

European governments made their citizens into “*savage*” racists in order to justify colonial violence, but in the process they morally “poison” these citizens by teaching them that not all people are equal (even if the national constitution says so) and unchecked violence can sometimes be justified, if and when the government so decides. It is therefore no wonder, Césaire implies, that Europe divided against itself in both World Wars.

☞ Yes, it would be worthwhile to study clinically, in detail, the steps taken by Hitler and Hitlerism and to reveal to the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century that without his being aware of it, he has a Hitler inside him, that Hitler *inhabits* him, that Hitler is his *demon*, that if he rails against him, he is being inconsistent and that, at bottom, what he cannot forgive Hitler for is not *the crime* in itself, *the crime against man*, it is not *the humiliation of man as such*, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the “coolies” of India, and the “niggers” of Africa.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker), Adolf Hitler

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis


Most people have come to think of Hitler as the human embodiment of absolute evil and see him as unmatched in the entirety of human history. In other words, while they admit that Nazi Germany committed horrific and morally unjustifiable crimes against humanity, they consider it a striking exception to the rest of European history, which they see as marked by continuous progress toward freedom, reason, democracy, and equality. According to Césaire, while these people are absolutely right about the pure evil of Hitler’s Germany and the indescribable horrors of the Holocaust, they are wrong about the Nazis being unique in European history. Césaire thinks that Hitler is the rule, not the exception. In fact, he sees Hitler as the *pinnacle* of European culture, the logical culmination of the principles it had been developing and testing out around the world for centuries: racism, genocide, slavery, and plunder. Where France and Great Britain pursued these actions slowly and cautiously in their colonies, Hitler did so openly and proudly in Europe.

It is important not to distort Césaire’s argument here: he is not saying that Europe *deserved* a genocide and he is emphatically not saying that Europe’s Jews were partially responsible for colonialism. Rather, his point is that preventing events like the Holocaust from happening in the future requires studying their true causes and effects, and understanding the Holocaust requires seeing that it was modeled on European colonialism overseas. Nazi Germany did exactly what the Spanish did in the Americas or the French and British did in Africa and Southeast Asia: it invaded new territory in search of economic and political power, then invented an ideology of racial supremacy to justify this invasion and began systematically murdering people who did not fit into its concept of the nation.

Césaire wants contemporary readers to see that most mid-20th century Europeans actually shared Hitler’s white supremacist beliefs, and a whole country eagerly supported a policy of ethnic cleansing *precisely because* they thought that white Christians were inherently superior to Jews and, for that matter, all nonwhite people throughout the world. This is why Césaire says that European bourgeois people “ha[ve] a Hitler inside [them].” Much of Europe had no objection to the genocide of European Jews, and the United States was so anti-Semitic that it turned away thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis. Now, however, Europeans and Americans have begun to consider Jewish people as “white” and therefore recognize the Holocaust as the crime against humanity that it was. Yet they have not extended the same decency to the victims of European genocides in the Americas, Asia, and Africa; this shows that the racism of the Nazis, which is the same as the racism of European colonization, is still alive and well.

●● For my part, if I have recalled a few details of these hideous butcheries, it is by no means because I take a morbid delight in them, but because I think that these heads of men, these collections of ears, these burned houses, these Gothic invasions, this steaming blood, these cities that evaporate at the edge of the sword, are not to be so easily disposed of. They prove that colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonization that I wanted to point out.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 41


Explanation and Analysis

As he traces the history of European colonial rule in the Americas, Asia, and particularly Africa, Césaire does not shy away from the gory details that most respectable intellectuals or school textbooks would be unwilling to address. He considers it necessary to show the evil that seemingly “civilized” people are capable of committing in the right circumstances. This not only shows his readers the profound importance of addressing the violence of European colonization, but also warns them against the likelihood that this violence will repeat itself in the future. Europeans must face the “details of these hideous butcheries” in order to truly confront the facts of their own history. (The people that Europe has colonized have no choice but to face this history, as they live with its consequences.) By denying and covering up the violence of colonialism, Europeans continue refusing to take non-Europeans seriously as human beings who deserve, at the very least, recognition and an apology.

But most of all, Césaire insists, the vile details of colonial violence show how colonialism morally corrupted *Europeans*—this does not compare to the devastation it wreaked on the rest of the world, but it shows that it was never worth the effort, even for the people who expected to gain from it. When he notes that he is not examining this history out of “morbid delight,” Césaire highlights this insidious truth: many Europeans were delighted to hear that their countrymen were cutting the heads off native people, burning down entire villages, and murdering children for sport. They saw this as evidence that their superior race was taking its rightful place in the world, and in losing their capacity to recognize the rights and humanity of people outside their continent, they sacrificed the essence of their own humanity, which is what fundamentally gives their lives value.

●● My turn to state an equation: colonization = “thingification.”

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

This line, perhaps the best-known of the entire *Discourse on Colonialism*, is Césaire's attempt to distill the violence of colonialism down to its central principle: colonization is the conversion of people into things. This is what makes it immoral, allows it to proceed, and ultimately leads to its collapse.

First, Europe's "thingification" of the people it colonized is the essence of what makes its colonialism evil: by denying the humanity of people under its control, Europe justified any and all violence against them. In other words, it created a hierarchy of human life and placed white Europeans at the very top, so that their interests would always outweigh the suffering of everyone else. But secondly, this process was also crucial to the success of colonization, because people would not have been willing to participate in or support it had they been able to empathize with its victims. In order to enslave or murder someone, in other words, it is virtually necessary to refuse to see them as a full human being, with their own emotions and tastes, beliefs and principles, families and loving relationships, and so on. After all, the most successful movements against oppression—like the nonviolent movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in India and the global movement to stop apartheid—are successful precisely because they show the world the often forgotten humanity of the people who are victimized by those in power. This is why, third and finally, colonization's "thingification" leads to its collapse: people will never consent to having their humanity taken away. In many cases, left with nothing more to lose, they launch revolutions—of the very sort that Césaire observed, envisioned, and encouraged during the post-World War II wave of decolonization.

“They talk to me about progress, about “achievements,” diseases cured, improved standards of living.


I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out.

[...]

They dazzle me with the tonnage of cotton or cocoa that has been exported, the acreage that has been planted with olive trees or grapevines.

I am talking about natural *economies* that have been disrupted—harmonious and viable *economies* adapted to the indigenous population—about food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries; about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

When asked to justify the claim that colonization brought “civilization” to the world, European bureaucrats and intellectuals are seldom completely stumped: rather, they bring a common set of justifications to the table. Even today, many people think that these justifications offer at least a reasonable case that colonization was worth the pain it caused. Of course, a precise description of this pain is almost invariably left out of the analysis, and upon closer examination, Césaire concludes, there is absolutely no good reason to believe that the products of colonialism were worth it. The creation of railroads and shipping routes was not worth the slavery of the people who built them or the robbery of the goods that were exported through them, and the creation of plantations was not worth the destruction of sustainable agriculture.

Moreover, the fact that colonialism created things like railroads and cotton plantations does not mean colonialism was *necessary* for these things to be created. For instance, it is possible to grow cotton on plantations by employing slaves or by paying free workers a fair wage, which means that slavery was not *necessary* to create a cotton industry. Similarly, colonialism was not uniquely capable of creating the few benefits it left behind. Indeed, Césaire insists that the world after colonialism cannot be reasonably compared to the world *before* colonialism, more than five centuries ago: rather, it must be compared to what the world would

be like today if colonialism had never happened and different civilizations coexisted instead. There is no doubt that technology would have spread like it does today, with one country imitating another's innovations, and therefore there is no doubt that vaccines would be widely available (just as they are today), for instance, and most countries would have roads and railroads, just like they have today—if not much better ones, in the cases of countries whose labor and resources were dedicated exclusively to the development of foreign capital for several centuries.

●● The proof is that at present it is the indigenous peoples of Africa and Asia who are demanding schools, and colonialist Europe which refuses them; that it is the African who is asking for ports and roads, and colonialist Europe which is niggardly on this score; that it is the colonized man who wants to move forward, and the colonizer who holds things back.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 46



Explanation and Analysis

Césaire insists that it is absurd to say that colonialism was justified by the technology and institutions that European governments left behind in their colonies, like the railroads created to transport natural resources back to Europe or the universities built to train loyal bureaucrats and missionaries. Although he examines the different products of colonialism and dismisses each in turn, he ultimately thinks that a simple litmus test shows why European rule was not benevolent by any stretch of the imagination. The test is this: who wants progress, and what is preventing this progress? The answer is simple: colonized people want to build democratic institutions and self-governing nations, new infrastructure and strong education systems, and so on. The European colonial governments are refusing to let this progress happen, even though they hypocritically claim to have a monopoly on “progress” and “civilization.” Is there any clearer sign of who *truly* stands for progress, civilization, democracy, freedom, enlightenment, and so on?

Section 3 Quotes

●● Once again, I systematically defend our old Negro civilizations: they were courteous civilizations. So the real problem, you say, is to return to them. No, I repeat. We are not men for whom it is a question of “either-or.” For us, the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond. It is not a dead society that we want to revive. We leave that to those who go in for exoticism. Nor is it the present colonial society that we wish to prolong, the most putrid carrion that ever rotted under the sun. It is a new society that we must create, with the help of all our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51-2

Explanation and Analysis

After he presents his interpretation of global colonial history, Césaire asks what should actually be done about colonialism. Remember that he is writing in 1950: while most nations in the Americas have been independent for more than a century, the first Asian nations like (the Philippines, Indonesia, and India) have recently won independence from colonial powers, Vietnam was in the middle of its war for independence, and essentially all of Africa and much of Césaire's native Caribbean remained colonized. Therefore, the most important question for Césaire and his contemporaries was how colonized nations should free themselves from European control and how they should organize the independent nations they manage to create.

Césaire fully admits that, while the destruction of non-European civilizations by European invaders was tragic, it makes no sense to try and rebuild these civilizations, which in most cases have been gone for generations. (Only a handful—like Ethiopia, Thailand, and Bhutan—remain today.) Rather, independence leaders must honor these past civilizations while also putting into action the lessons they have learned under colonization and through anticolonial struggle. Of course, Césaire *was* one of these leaders. He ended up controversially advocating for the incorporation of his native Martinique into France rather than independence, which he thought would effectively turn it into an economic colony of the United States. However, he also influenced other such leaders, most notably his close friend Leopold Sédar Senghor, who became the first

president of Senegal.

Concretely, for Césaire, building this “new society” means using the vast “productive power” created through colonialism—factories, infrastructure, technology, and so on—in a way that ensures common advancement and equity for all the nation’s people, who have gone from colonial subjects to citizens of a young nation. Notably, this proposal further attests to the central place of Marxist theory in Césaire’s thought: the society he is proposing is unmistakably Communist (and he says this explicitly at the very end of the *Discourse*). Specifically, Marxists have generally argued that technological advancement, coupled with an equal distribution of resources, can provide the universal abundance and self-fulfillment that would constitute the best form of human society.

☛ One cannot say that the petty bourgeois has never read anything. On the contrary, he has read everything, devoured everything.

Only, his brain functions after the fashion of certain elementary types of digestive systems. It filters. And the filter lets through only what can nourish the thick skin of the bourgeois’s clear conscience.

Before the arrival of the French in their country, the Vietnamese were people of an old culture, exquisite and refined. To recall this fact upsets the digestion of the Banque d’Indochine. Start the forgetting machine!

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 52-3

Explanation and Analysis

As he begins shifting his attention to the colonial-era intellectuals and aristocrats who supported and intellectually justified the ruthless exploitation of Asia and Africa, Césaire first outlines their strategy in broad strokes: they rewrite history to portray Europe as the savior of lost and uncultured non-European peoples who lacked “civilization” of their own. But this requires them to strategically ignore all the data that goes against their beliefs, like the artistic, scientific, and cultural achievements of other cultures (which, if they are acknowledged at all, must be seen as “primitive”). In other words, the petty bourgeoisie must forget Vietnam’s “exquisite and refined” courtly culture (or the innovations of Indian and Islamic philosophy, the architectural and scientific innovations of indigenous American civilizations, and so on) in order to


satisfy the truth they have already picked out for themselves.

Césaire refers to these groups as the “petty bourgeoisie” because, in addition to having some small measure of political and economic power, they focus their time and energy on defending the interests of more powerful bourgeois people and institutions. Well-off intellectuals whose salaries depend on the government, comfortable merchants who are hoping to strike it rich through the colonial trade, and small-time bureaucrats who seek a name for themselves overseas are all members of this class. Because they wanted to become bourgeois, the petty bourgeoisie had to make the excesses of the bourgeois aristocracy palatable to themselves, and in turn they preached these values to the rest of society, spreading the morally corrupt colonial culture that Césaire blames for the dissolution of the global order in the first half of the 20th century.

Section 4 Quotes

☛ Our Gourou has slipped his leash; now we’re in for it; he’s going to tell everything; he’s beginning: “The typical hot countries find themselves faced with the following dilemma: economic stagnation and protection of the natives or temporary economic development and regression of the natives.” “Monsieur Gourou, this is very serious! I’m giving you a solemn warning: in this game it is your career which is at stake.” So our Gourou chooses to back off and refrain from specifying that, if the dilemma exists, it exists only within the framework of the existing regime; that if this paradox constitutes an iron law, it is only the iron law of colonialist capitalism, therefore of a society that is not only perishable but already in the process of perishing. What impure and worldly geography!

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker), Pierre Gourou

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

In this section of his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire specifically profiles three intellectuals who enforce the will of European colonial states by passing off shoddy science as authoritative scholarship. The first is Pierre Gourou, a geographer who boldly claims that no civilization has ever been formed in the tropical regions of the globe. With what

Césaire considers an almost comical absurdity and lack of irony, Gourou claims that this lack of civilization is a result of tropical regions' very "tropicality."



Césaire has no interest in disproving this obviously false claim, which no professional anthropologist or geographer would agree with today. Rather, he points out that Gourou is cleverer than he looks—even if this is not saying much. Namely, even while he argues that French colonialism in the tropics must have been benevolent because tropical people lacked civilization entirely (and so had nothing to lose), Gourou also explicitly recognizes how the French government abused its power and cruelly exploited native peoples by forcing them into slavery and servitude. In this telling passage, he even admits that "temporary economic development" (for the French) would require "regression of the natives." But he goes no further, and Césaire sees this as clear evidence of how his personal commitments as an individual prevented his scholarship from being objective or neutral. As Césaire puts it, Gourou's "career [was] at stake," so he could not speak the truth and instead ended up publishing what the government wanted the French public and intellectual classes to hear. Rather than actually seeking out the truth, as his job description demands in theory, Gourou ended up creating propaganda for the colonial government, which was his job in practice.

☝ In short, you tip your hat to the Bantu life force, you give a wink to the immortal Bantu soul. And that's all it costs you! You have to admit you're getting off cheap!

As for the government, why should it complain? Since, the Rev. Tempels notes with obvious satisfaction, "from their first contact with the white men, the Bantu considered us from the only point of view that was possible to them, the point of view of their Bantu philosophy" and "*integrated us into their hierarchy of life forces at a very high level.*"

In other words, arrange it so that the white man, and particularly the Belgian, and even more particularly Albert or Leopold, takes his place at the head of the hierarchy of Bantu life forces, and you have done the trick. You will have brought this miracle to pass: *the Bantu god will take responsibility for the Belgian colonialist order, and any Bantu who dares to raise his hand against it will be guilty of sacrilege.*

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker), Reverend Tempels

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis


The Belgian missionary Reverend Tempels served in the Belgian Congo a few decades after the end of the so-called "Rubber Terror" (1885-1908), one of the bloodiest and most notorious periods of colonial rule in recorded history. Even though his intentions were supposedly noble, Tempels ended up serving the interests of the colonial government as a propagandist, just like all the other colonial scholars that Césaire profiles in this section of the *Discourse on Colonialism*.

Tempels focused his research on the philosophy of the Congo's Bantu peoples. Quite conveniently for the Belgian colonial government who supported him, Tempels "discovered" that the Bantu were willing to embrace anything they accepted as a higher "life force" and happened to see white people (who, it should be remembered, invaded their villages and enslaved them) as one such higher force. In other words, Tempels argued, the Bantu *also* believed in white supremacy and thought it was their place to be enslaved on rubber plantations. It seems that this argument would fully absolve the Belgians of their crimes against humanity: after all, Tempels seemed to believe, the Congolese were willing to be slaughtered, so long as the higher (white) life force said so!

There are a number of problems with this nonsensical argument, which clearly serves the private interests of Belgium. Technically, the central problem is that Tempels's theory of *how* people use philosophy does not reflect reality. "Bantu" is an extremely large categorization: it covers millions of people who speak hundreds of different languages and live in various different social structures. To say that all these people lived according to a single "Bantu philosophy" would be like meeting a few Catholics and then concluding that absolutely all Europeans must structure their entire lives around the theological tenets of the Catholic Church. This is simply not how societies work, and anyone who lives in a society—which is to say anyone at all—should know this instantaneously. However, because Europeans learned to think of Africans as inherently different and "primitive," many accepted it as plausible that all of them followed a set of mystical indigenous beliefs that determined everything from what they would eat for breakfast to whether they would fight back against European colonizers.

●● It is the destiny of the Occidental to face the obligation laid down by the commandment *Thou shalt leave thy father and thy mother*. This obligation is incomprehensible to the Madagascan. At a given time in his development, every European discovers in himself the desire ... to break the bonds of dependency, to become the equal of his father. The Madagascan, never! He does not experience rivalry with the paternal authority, “manly protest,” or Adlerian inferiority—ordeals through which the European must pass and which are like civilized forms ... of the initiation rites by which one achieves manhood...

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire, Dominique-Octave Mannoni

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Like the other intellectuals whose work Césaire examines in this section of the *Discourse on Colonialism*, the psychoanalyst Dominique-Octave Mannoni develops a theory that manages to portray European colonization—and all of the unnecessary violence that accompanied it—as a natural and benevolent force that neither can nor should be stopped. According to Mannoni, “the Occidental” (meaning European people) are naturally destined to go overseas, symbolically prove themselves to their parents, and thereby “break the bonds of [familial] dependency” by conquering and subjugating other people. In other words, colonialism was simply Europeans’ natural attempt to become “manly” and “civilized.” However, Mannoni says, the people they colonized not only lacked this natural drive toward achieving “manhood” through violence, but in fact conveniently had the opposite destiny: they had a “dependency complex” and needed to be colonized in order to truly be happy!

The only thing more absurd than Mannoni’s twisted reasoning, Césaire argues, is the fact that Europeans took his writing completely seriously. Mannoni never wanted or needed to provide evidence for his theory: rather, the French public—even in the mid-20th century—was perfectly willing to accept that there was some inherent difference between themselves and black people, which meant it was their natural destiny to rule over Africans and those Africans’ natural destiny to be slaves. All Mannoni needed to do was package this racist nonsense in respectable academic language. Crucially, Mannoni’s writings did not

only serve the general interests of French colonialism and racism; they also served a specific political need to consolidate power in Madagascar after the recent independence movement, conventionally known as the Malagasy Uprising, in which the French completely rejected independence activists’ demands before indiscriminately slaughtering thousands of them.

●● (Come on, you know how it is. These Negroes can't even imagine what freedom is. They don't want it, they don't demand it. It's the white agitators who put that into their heads. And if you gave it to them, they wouldn't know what to do with it.)

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker), Dominique-Octave Mannoni

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 60



Explanation and Analysis

After he summarizes the racist psychoanalytic theory of colonial French scholar Dominique-Octave Mannoni, Césaire points out that Mannoni isn’t even a *creative* or *original* racist: rather, his entire theory is based on the tired racist trope that black people need to be subjugated by Europeans because they are literally incapable of understanding freedom. (Of course, the fact that Césaire wrote this book is one way of refuting this baseless stereotype.)

However, in mentioning Mannoni’s reliance on this trope, Césaire’s goal is less to show his readers that Mannoni’s theory is false than to trace the rhetorical strategy that Mannoni uses to justify the French colonial government’s inexcusable behavior in Madagascar. While the other thinkers Césaire analyzes (Pierre Gourou and the Reverend Tempels) use tenuous evidence and unreliable analysis to arrive at conclusions that clearly justify Europeans’ racism, Mannoni simply repackages racist assumptions and builds his theory directly off of them. Rather than showing French people how reality might justify their racism, then, Mannoni shows them how their racism conveniently justifies France’s colonial exploits abroad. Césaire uses this example to highlight the way that scholars’ conclusions are inseparable from their assumptions, which in turn often depend on the social and cultural context in which they live, work, and are received.

●● And the striking thing they all have in common is the persistent bourgeois attempt to reduce the most human problems to comfortable, hollow notions: the *idea* of the dependency complex in Mannoni, the ontological *idea* in the Rev. Tempels, the *idea* of “tropicality” in Gourou. What has become of the Banque d’Indochine in all that? And the Banque de Madagascar? And the bullwhip? And the taxes? And the handful of rice to the Madagascan or the *nhaqué*? And the martyrs? And the innocent people murdered? And the bloodstained money piling up in your coffers, gentlemen? They have evaporated! Disappeared, intermingled, become unrecognizable in the realm of pale ratiocinations.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker), Dominique-Octave Mannoni, Reverend Tempels, Pierre Gourou

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis


After he summarizes and analyzes the racist theories of the geographer Pierre Gourou, the missionary Reverend Tempels, and the psychoanalyst Dominique-Octave Mannoni, Césaire explains how they all work together to collectively divert the public’s attention from the atrocities that their governments are busy committing. In short, they replace *material realities* with *ideas*; they explain events and inequalities in terms of culture, personality, destiny, and other immaterial factors, rather than simply pointing out those events’ immediate historical causes.

As Césaire has argued throughout the *Discourse on Colonialism*, Europe’s *true* motivation for colonizing the rest of the world is deceptively, even disappointingly simple: colonization was a good way to make money and amass power. But scholars like Gourou, Tempels, and Mannoni build their careers off of people’s need for an explanation that feels adequate to the scale of the problem: they turn a simple material reality (money and power) into a complicated narrative (ideas) in order to at once satisfy people’s curiosity and give them a story that helps them feel like their nation’s colonial exploits are justified.

●● The supreme goal of the People-State is to preserve the original elements of the race which, by spreading culture, create the beauty and dignity of a superior humanity.

Related Characters: Adolf Hitler (speaker), Aimé Césaire

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After he summarizes the theories of a few prominent European intellectuals in depth in order to show how they justified colonialism by explaining it through ideas rather than material realities, Césaire notes that the most powerful and widespread racist scholarship comes from biologists who have decided that race resides in people’s blood and mixed-race people foretell the decline of so-called Western civilization.

Here, he presents a jarringly similar quote from Adolf Hitler in order to emphasize the clear continuity between the scholarship he has examined and the explicit ideology of the Nazi regime that systematically murdered six million European Jews in the Holocaust. Césaire’s point is clear: the Nazis’ ideology was not unique; Hitler even seemed to consider himself a humanist, like so many French and British intellectuals who are still celebrated today. His affinity for mass murder and belief in the progress and improvement of humanity through the “preserv[ation]” of the “superior” white race are two sides of the same coin. But since so many white intellectuals in Europe, the United States, and other self-declared Western countries openly advocated white supremacist ideas in Césaire’s time and continue to do so today, it would be shortsighted and misguided to say that Hitler’s beliefs were an anomaly and that the Holocaust will never repeat itself. All the elements of Hitler’s creed—which are also the elements of Europe’s “civilized mission”—are still in circulation and still carry the horrible potential that they held in the Nazis’ hands.

Section 5 Quotes

●● His doctrine? It has the virtue of simplicity. That the West invented science. That the West alone knows how to think; that at the borders of the Western world there begins the shadowy realm of primitive thinking which, dominated by the notion of participation, incapable of logic, is the very model of faulty thinking.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker), Roger Caillois

Related Themes: 



Page Number: 69


Explanation and Analysis

In the penultimate section of the *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire examines the work of one more scholar, Roger Caillois, whose racist writings were unique because they spoke to the very underpinnings of scholarship itself. Caillois argued that scientific research—and specifically the social science research method of *ethnography*—was only legitimate in the hands of white scholars. According to Caillois, nonwhite and non-European people (including, presumably, Césaire himself) are simply not suited to become writers and intellectuals. Caillois’s reasoning is neither valid nor important—what does matter is his *motivation* for making this argument. It allows him to suggest that Europeans have more valid knowledge about the rest of humanity than non-Europeans can have about themselves, which means it provides French audiences with a reason to take racist social science for granted, while automatically questioning the work of nonwhite writers who actually suffered under colonialism. In other words, Caillois’s historically inaccurate argument about the origins and nature of science served to silence voices who might disagree with European colonialism and amplify the work of scholars who sought to defend it. In turn, Caillois’s own writing is not only *influenced* by his social position and self-interest—it is actually *completely determined* by these factors and designed to protect his (and other white writers’) privilege in the realm of academia.

●● And the museums of which M. Caillois is so proud, not for one minute does it cross his mind that, all things considered, it would have been better not to have needed them; that Europe would have done better to tolerate the non-European civilizations at its side, leaving them alive, dynamic and prosperous, whole and not mutilated; that it would have been better to let them develop and fulfill themselves than to present for our admiration, duly labelled, their dead and scattered parts; that anyway, the museum by itself is nothing; that it means nothing, that it can say nothing, when smug self-satisfaction rots the eyes, when a secret contempt for others withers the heart, when racism, admitted or not, dries up sympathy; that it means nothing if its only purpose is to feed the delights of vanity; that after all, the honest contemporary of Saint Louis, who fought Islam but respected it, had a better chance of *knowing* it than do our contemporaries (even if they have a smattering of ethnographic literature), who despise it. No, in the scales of knowledge all the museums in the world will never weigh so much as one spark of human sympathy.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker), Roger Caillois

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 71-2

Explanation and Analysis

Césaire notes that European social scientists like Roger Caillois frequently cite their contributions to human knowledge in order to justify their participation in colonialism. In reality, their interests in protecting colonialism ironically undermine the validity of the knowledge they produce. And, more to the point, no amount of knowledge could ever justify colonization: not only are violence and knowledge completely different sorts of things that cannot justifiably be compared, but colonialism was never necessary to achieve the knowledge that Europeans praise—they could have learned everything they have learned about the rest of the world (and probably much more) without destroying all the civilizations they were learning about. Rather, Caillois’s argument is a weak excuse, a story invented after the fact in order to try and justify colonial violence that was really committed in the name of profit and power.



Caillois conceptualizes the knowledge that Europe has gained through colonialism through the model of the museum: it learns about faraway places, then puts their stories, art, and artifacts on display back in Europe. But Césaire notes that this is not *knowledge* at all: it is a way of *representing* knowledge, which is no more or less effective as a book. More importantly, it is a terrible way to represent knowledge, since it portrays living, breathing, thinking cultures through the lens of inanimate objects, which it locks behind glass. In fact, this is part and parcel of colonization’s “thingification” of non-European peoples: when they build museums, social scientists and academic institutions literally reduce people to collections of objects. These ethnographic museums are not monuments to the peoples they are meant to portray: rather, they are monuments to the colonial project itself, which is based on theft and appropriation. When people marvel at the art or clothing of non-European cultures in a museum, they assume that those cultures are dead—that they rightfully belong in a museum rather than in the real world. Rather than locking up other people’s societies, cultures, and histories in stuffy museums, Césaire calls upon Europe to look them in the eyes, take them seriously as equals, and actually learn from them.

Section 6 Quotes

☞ American domination—the only domination from which one never recovers. I mean from which one never recovers unscarred.

And since you are talking about factories and industries, do you not see the tremendous factory hysterically spitting out its cinders in the heart of our forests or deep in the bush, the factory for the production of lackeys; do you not see the prodigious mechanization, the mechanization of man; the gigantic rape of everything intimate, undamaged, undefiled that, despoiled as we are, our human spirit has still managed to preserve; the machine, yes, have you never seen it, the machine for crushing, for grinding, for degrading peoples?

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In the concluding section of the *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire argues that Europe's crimes against the rest of the world—and moral crimes against itself—have brought it to the brink of collapse. But this does not mean that the violence of colonialism will be erased, nor that new forms of colonialism will not arise in the near future. On the contrary, writing in the 1950s, Césaire sees European colonialism as in the process of transforming into something just as insidious and inhuman as its most recent, imperial form: American globalized capitalism.

Even as the United States claimed to support decolonization efforts around the world in the wake of World War II, Césaire points out, it was doing so for its own benefit: when European governments lost their formal power over the rest of the world, leading Asian and African countries to begin planning their own futures and economic strategies, American investors could swoop in and take control of these countries' capital and resources. The United States has invested its economic, political, and military might into ensuring that the rest of the world develops according to its self-interested plan: it makes sure that developing countries dedicate their factories to building cheap trinkets for Americans, their natural resources toward the production of American technology, and their best food and agricultural products for export to the United States, Europe, and so on. In other words, under globalized capitalism, the entire world becomes called upon

to serve the economic interests of the American economic elite, just as colonialism forced non-European peoples to work for the benefit of the European bourgeoisie.

☞ The salvation of Europe is not a matter of a revolution in methods. It is a matter of the Revolution—the one which, until such time as there is a classless society, will substitute for the narrow tyranny of a dehumanized bourgeoisie the preponderance of the only class that still has a universal mission, because it suffers in its flesh from all the wrongs of history, from all the universal wrongs: the proletariat.

Related Characters: Aimé Césaire (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Césaire ends the *Discourse on Colonialism* with an unambiguous call for revolution, which he clarifies means two different things at the same time. First, he believes that colonized people should overthrow the European colonial governments that rule over them, and second, he believes that the proletariat (or working class) must rule over the bourgeoisie (or capitalist elite) that runs the economy for its own benefit. Essentially, Césaire thought that, because colonialism was founded on capitalism, a struggle against colonialism must also struggle against capitalism in order to be effective. Although for complex political reasons Césaire did not opt for revolution in his native Martinique and ultimately left the Communist Party, neither of these facts affected his overarching critique of capitalism: even with a new government led by native people, a colonized nation would never truly be free so long as its citizens' jobs and livelihoods were still determined by the demands of European and American capital. In this sense, Césaire's analysis help contemporary readers see not only why independent postcolonial governments in Africa and Asia have largely failed to create the free and equal societies they promised (although this does not by any means make these societies worse than colonial rule), but also why formal political independence is only a first step toward true human emancipation, which requires more than just being a citizen of one's own nation: it also requires an equal and democratically-chosen distribution of resources and wealth.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SECTION 1

Europe is “decadent,” “sick,” and “dying,” Césaire begins, because it has terrorized the world but refuses to address the damage it has caused or stick up for its principles. Specifically, elite-ruled Europe must confront “the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem,” which are both of its own creation. Despite praising “reason” and “conscience,” it hypocritically violates both. Therefore, Césaire declares, “*Europe is indefensible.*”

Césaire introduces the contradiction between Europe’s values and its hypocritical actions, then wastes no time in calling for the end of the European-dominated global order. This can only be understood in the post-World War II colonial context in which he lived: Europe spent four centuries subjugating and dividing up the world to feed its outlandish imperial ambitions, which then imploded in two catastrophic wars that killed millions of people all across the world. In other words, according to Césaire, colonial massacres and genocides, the two World Wars, and the horrors of Nazi Germany were all consequences of the same “indefensible” hypocrisy. When Césaire compares the proletariat (or working classes) and the colonized, he means to say that their suffering is one and the same: it is capitalism, the economic system of private ownership and profit-maximization, that drove Europe to colonize the world in the first place. This shows that Césaire’s Marxism is inseparable from his anticolonialism: the revolution he calls for is not only against Europe, but against all of capitalism.



Europe has brutalized the places and people it colonized, who see through its lies and understand its weakness. Its “principal lie” is that “colonization” means “**civilization**,” and this lie is really a way for Europe “to legitimize [its] hateful solutions” to false problems. Colonization, in reality, was never motivated by religious sympathy, scientific wisdom, or the desire to spread freedom and justice: it was really about economics, and the people who actually led colonial conquest admitted this openly. Other people justified their actions by deciding that “*Christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery.*” While cultural exchange does profoundly strengthen nations by “blend[ing] different worlds” and allowing the “genius” in each to reinforce one another, this was not the purpose of colonialism. In fact, “*colonization and civilization*” are opposites, not synonyms, and all the “expeditions,” “statues,” and “memoranda” that colonial powers honor in their **museums** contain absolutely *nothing* of value.

Césaire elaborates on the hypocrisy of Europe by emphasizing that actions are more important than words: contrary to what Europeans and Americans continue to learn in school, their governments were never interested in spreading democracy, Christianity, or so-called Western civilization. Rather, these arguments were excuses, invented after the fact in order to retroactively justify the brutality of colonization. Ironically, while Europeans and Americans easily believe in the lie of the “civilizing mission,” the people that Europe has colonized are fully aware of its true economic motives and complete disrespect for the lives of nonwhite peoples. In short, students must look at European and American governments’ actions in the past, because the stories that their countries tell are neither trustworthy nor consistent. While foreign intervention and colonial conquest are still seen as normal, natural, and inevitable parts of history, Césaire emphasizes that Europeans actively chose to destroy existing governments in other parts of the world, enslave native peoples in order to make more money, and massacre those people when they asked for independence.



SECTION 2

The violence of colonization serves to “decivilize” and “brutalize” the people who commit it. Like a disease, colonization infects European culture, which grows hypocritical and “proceeds toward savagery.” When Europe ran out of non-Europeans to torture, Nazism arose like a “boomerang effect,” directed back on Europe itself. However, Césaire continues, Europeans fail to see that they have done the same thing outside Europe for centuries. Even the “very Christian bourgeois” European “has a Hitler inside him,” and Europeans only hate Hitler because he directed his crimes against white people. In other words, Hitler was unique only because he “applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for” nonwhite peoples Europeans denigrated as inferior. As long as Europe remains capitalist, Césaire insists, it will only reserve human rights for itself; Hitler is the logical conclusion of capitalism and European philosophy.

Césaire’s argument about the effects of colonial violence on Europeans is significant for two reasons: first, it inverts the normal, racist use of the word “civilization” to mean Europe and “savagery” to mean non-European peoples. Second, it points out the inherent instability of the endless quest for profit and power, which eventually undermines itself. However, he also clarifies that not all Europeans are directly responsible for the violence of colonialism: rather, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the government bureaucrats, wealthy aristocrats (or bourgeoisie), and colonial settlers and soldiers who directly plotted, financed, participated in, and personally benefited from enslaving, massacring, and systematically robbing people in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Similarly, when he calls Nazism a “boomerang effect,” he absolutely does not mean that the Holocaust was inevitable or that its victims’ suffering was justified. Rather, he is pointing out that Europeans had been carrying out the same type of genocide for several centuries (first throughout the Americas, and later in Asia and Africa), and that the unfathomable horrors of Nazi concentration camps were the culmination of colonialism as a whole. The Nazis expanded within Europe because there was no territory left to exploit outside it, and within recent memory, all of Western Europe’s governments believed in white supremacy and considered it reasonable to enslave and slaughter people just because they were not white. In other words, Césaire contends, countries like France, Great Britain, and the United States had no legitimate moral authority over the Nazis, because they all committed very similar atrocities in the recent past.



Césaire quotes someone who calls for the “domination [...] of a foreign race” in order to make “the inequalities among men [...] into a law.” But this not Hitler speaking: it is the humanist philosopher Renan, who believed that Europeans have a God-given right to conquer “inferior or degenerate races” like “Negroes and Chinese,” whom he considered stupid, without principles, and destined for servitude. European colonial governors and religious leaders believed the same lies: that non-Europeans are Godless “incompetents” who have no human rights and leave valuable natural resources in the ground—and so need to be conquered by Europeans. Although these writers thought of themselves as defending humanity, they spouted the same lies as Hitler and defended the same conduct. “No one colonizes innocently,” Césaire concludes. Nations that colonize others are “morally diseased” and eventually produce “the negation of **civilization**, pure and simple.”

Although many Europeans try to forget colonizers’ morally reprehensible indifference toward non-European lives, this history cannot be erased. One French conqueror bragged of ordering people decapitated and another of collecting prisoners’ ears; a third excitedly called for “a great invasion of Africa,” and a fourth remembered his soldiers, “intoxicated by the smell of blood,” massacring thousands of women and children. Their “sadistic pleasures” must be remembered because “they prove that colonization [...] dehumanizes even the most **civilized** man.” To reconcile themselves with the violence they commit, colonizers view and treat non-Europeans as animals, but in turn they become animals themselves. Some Europeans were even delighted that their countrymen could act out their violent impulses in colonies without punishment.

Césaire wants readers to see that Hitler’s beliefs were not an anomaly in Western history: some of Europe and North America’s most celebrated thinkers, like the French philosopher Renan, have believed in the exact same white supremacist ideology that Hitler put into action. This ideology has always infected American and Western European popular and intellectual culture, Césaire insists, and most of the people who advance it might seem innocuous or even benevolent. But it is a life-and-death battle for the vast majority of the world’s people, whom these white supremacists consider less than human and therefore not deserving of the same rights, protections, and privileges as Europeans. The fight against white supremacism and for racial justice was not over after World War II, nor did it end during Césaire’s lifetime—and nor would Césaire consider it over today, by any stretch of the imagination. The justifications that white supremacists of his time used for their beliefs, Césaire points out, are actually just biases attributable to European culture: while some European nations dedicated themselves to farming cash crops and extracting resources like gold and coal from the ground, for instance, much of the world found ways to live sustainably, without depleting natural resources. There is nothing “incompetent” about living sustainably, but neither side deserves to be dehumanized or slaughtered because of the way they have chosen to live. For Césaire, Europe is “the negation of civilization” precisely because it has always insisted on its own superiority, without learning to tolerate people who live and organize their societies differently.



Césaire has pointed out that colonization begins with a profit motive but eventually requires violence in order to protect that profit. (For instance, in order for American and European plantation owners to profit, they implemented a violent and repressive system of slavery.) Here, however, Césaire shows what happens next: Europeans who have accepted violence against non-Europeans as a means to profit begin seeing this violence as its own reward, and they actively seek out opportunities to kill, maim, rape, and torture people in the colonies. Again, it is essential to remember that this is exactly what happened during the Nazi regime: once they started seeing European Jews as inferior and inhuman, Nazis embraced violence and murder as both a necessary tactic to rid the world of “evil” and a source of personal enjoyment. This transition from violence for the sake of profit to violence for the sake of violence, all justified by the idea that violence would improve or “civilize” its victims, is the twisted core of colonial ideology.



European colonization has destroyed successful nations on every other continent, replacing them with “force, brutality, cruelty, sadism, conflict,” and poor education. There is no genuine cultural exchange, only brutality based on “relations of domination and submission.” In short, Césaire concludes, “colonization = ‘thingification.’” Europeans claim to have achieved “progress,” but they really destroyed the “extraordinary possibilities” of other civilizations. Europe raves about building infrastructure in its colonies, but it did so by forcing millions into slavery and leaving them with “an inferiority complex.” It prides itself on growing crops for export, but it eradicated indigenous agriculture and economies in the process. Europe has not defeated “local tyrants,” but rather cooperated with them to further oppress the population. Rather than providing “civilization,” Europe has provided “proletarianization and mystification.”

In contrast, the “non-European civilizations” were communal and democratic. They “did not pretend” to follow principles that they never actually put into action. However, Césaire does not hate all of Europe because of colonialism, which only happened because Europe “had fallen into the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industry.” And to advance these aims, European rulers “grafted modern abuse onto ancient injustice.” Progress in the colonized world has happened in spite of colonialism, not because of it. The people of colonized countries want things like school and infrastructure because they “want[] to move forward.” But Europe continues to stop them.

Césaire’s famous formula—“colonization = ‘thingification’”—captures the essence of what he sees as wrong with colonial, racist, and nationalist thinking: it requires seeing other people as mere “things,” rather than full human beings, and it uses this perspective to justify essentially any and all violence against those people. When Europeans and North Americans defend colonialism, they usually argue that it brought “civilization” to places that lacked it—meaning that these places had no complex social structure, existing system of government, or great artistic, architectural, and intellectual achievements. This is part of “thingification,” because it suggests that people are lesser because of their societies’ different levels of development. However, Césaire points out that this is simply false—it even contradicts the history that everyone learns in primary school: Africa, the Americas, and Asia were full of elaborate civilizations that were in no way inferior to the European ones that destroyed them.



While Europeans contend that non-European countries and civilizations were (or still are) inferior because of differences in culture, history, infrastructure, and so on, Césaire points out one concrete way that Europe was inferior to the rest of the world: only Europeans decided that people who did not look like them were not human beings and used this belief to justify murdering, raping, and enslaving them. However, Césaire emphasizes that this defect in European intellectual and political culture does not make all Europeans evil people. Accordingly, it would not be accurate to say that Césaire dehumanizes or “thingifies” Europeans in the same way as they have done to non-Europeans, because he does not turn value judgments about a society into value judgments about the people who live in that society. Rather, he sees a specific group of people—the European government officials and upper classes who planned, implemented, and benefitted from colonization—as specifically morally responsible for Europe’s devastation of the world.



SECTION 3

Western Europe's "**barbarism**"—which only the United States manages to surpass—has sunk in deeply, as people have forgotten that colonizers were "[swindlers, perjurers, forgers, thieves, and procurers](#)" and instead started treating them as heroes with "Christian virtues." This is not just Hitler's barbarism, Césaire emphasizes, but also the "cannibalistic hysteria" that passes for normal politics in places like France. He remembers the Malagasy Uprising, in which the French slaughtered tens of thousands of natives of Madagascar, and imagines the French drinking their blood. Césaire admits that he is no longer shocked by the racism of colonizers, but rather appreciates that at least they exhibit it "in broad daylight," because it shows that they know they are "mortal" and can be defeated. He quotes a philosopher, scientist, soldier, journalist, and even a member of the Académie Française, all of whom steadfastly proclaim that white people are inherently superior to non-Europeans.

Césaire again insists that he will "defend our old Negro **civilizations**," which were communal and "courteous" in comparison to Europe. These civilizations cannot be brought back, however: rather, humans must try to build "a new society" that values both equality and technological advancement. (The Soviet Union is a start, Césaire thinks.) And the French petty bourgeois who aid and abet colonization are not ignorant about the civilizations they have destroyed: on the contrary, they actually choose to forget Vietnam's "exquisite and refined" culture; Madagascar's "poets, artists, administrators;" the empires, art, and music of West Africa; and so on.

Césaire again emphasizes that the ideology of "civilization" was never intended to be true, but was rather carefully crafted in order to convince Europeans to support the "swindlers, perjurers, forgers, thieves, and procurers" who were flying their nations' flags overseas. Just as the French celebrated colonialism in Césaire's day, explorers who spent their lives enslaving and murdering people for profit (like Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Napoleon Bonaparte) are still celebrated as national heroes in places like Europe and the United States. While this is politics as usual today, Césaire calls it "cannibalistic hysteria" in order to point out the absurdity in a nation celebrating itself for killing innocent people. Indeed, Césaire's argument about the United States is crucial. Colonialism is not over, he emphasizes, but merely taking a different form: it is what people now call economic globalization, in which companies from Europe, the United States, and other historically wealthy countries profit by exploiting material resources and cheap (often unfree) labor in the developing world. This is the same principle as when European elites funded explorers and created trade companies to amass resources overseas in the 15th through 19th centuries.



Césaire wants to "defend our old Negro civilizations" not necessarily because he considers them inherently superior to Europe, but rather because he thinks that contemporary people have largely forgotten about their existence, scientific and artistic advances, and democratic politics. Many readers might ask how Césaire plans to do away with Europe, and he anticipates and answers that question here: the solution is to combine radical equality (modeled after non-European civilizations) with technological advancement (modeled after Europe) in order to create abundance for everyone. In fact, this is a rather traditional picture of a communist society, which again shows that Césaire sees the struggle against colonialism as an inseparable part of the struggle against capitalism. While it may seem strange that Césaire praises the Soviet Union, it is essential to recall that he is writing in 1950, before conclusive evidence of Stalin's crimes against humanity began to reach the West. A few years later, after learning this information, Césaire left the Communist Party and became a vocal critic of the Soviet Union.



SECTION 4

Césaire explains that his readers' "enemies" are not only the "sadistic governors and greedy bankers" who directly orchestrated colonization, but also the journalists and academics who justify colonization in the name of a "Progress" that never arrives. Regardless of their personal beliefs and best intentions, they must be held accountable for "the objective social implications of the evil work they perform as watchdogs of colonialism." Césaire offers some examples, like the anthropologist Pierre Gourou, who insisted "that [there has never been a great tropical civilization](#)," and the missionary Reverend Tempels, who conveniently "discovered" a Bantu philosophy in the Congo that happened to sanction Belgium's private property. Beyond ignoring the possibility that non-white races could be virtuous in any way, these academics contrast "the weakness of primitive thought" with their own "rationalism," conveniently forgetting that the rationalist philosophers believed *all* humans were inherently rational.

Césaire looks at these academics' work more closely. Pierre Gourou absurdly argued that nonwhite people "have taken no part" in science and can be saved only through colonialism, but he also admits that the indigenous people he studied "suffered" from things like "forced labor, slavery," and other "special new conditions" introduced by France. France had to choose between "economic stagnation and protection of the natives or temporary economic development and regression of the natives" for its colonies. The obvious solution, of course, was to give the natives their countries back, but Césaire suggests that Gourou chose not to challenge French empire because his "[career \[was\] at stake](#)."

Now that he has explained the fundamental contradiction between colonial Europe's ideology and its actions, Césaire shifts his focus to the way that specific writers and academics have helped develop that colonial ideology. Notably, he focuses on academics who are popular and influential in France at the same time that he is writing, which allows him to demonstrate how white supremacy remains foundational to European culture even after World War II. While they pose as social scientists who are seeking the truth about non-European cultures, these scholars are actually instruments of the French empire, responsible for inventing narratives that make colonialism seem benevolent.



According to Césaire, the contradictions throughout Gourou's thought demonstrate how political pressure prevented Gourou from speaking the truth: that colonialism was unjustified and repressive. In other words, Gourou's material self-interest as a writer dependent on the colonial government for his income and reputation trumped his actual dedication to truth and justice. Of course, this is a good reason to think that academics should be completely independent of all outside interests, government and private alike, lest they come up with absurd conclusions like Gourou's discredited belief that tropical civilizations could not "develop" without colonialism.



Similarly, Rev. Tempels was happy to let Belgium go to the Congo and “seize all the natural resources,” “stamp out all freedom,” and “crush all pride”. He just hoped to save “the Bantu philosophy” because it had no human face, and because he interpreted this philosophy as meaning that the Bantu wanted innate satisfaction rather than material wealth and safety. By putting white people at the top of “the hierarchy of Bantu life forces,” Tempels decided that the Bantu god wanted them to be colonized!

Tempels’s seemingly innocuous study of “Bantu philosophy,” like Gourou’s ostensibly objective study of tropical civilizations, aimed to justify European colonialism by means of distraction. Logically, Tempels’s error is assuming that culture can be reduced to a single, unified set of beliefs: nobody believes that Christian philosophy can account for everything about the structure of all European society, for instance. It is similarly unlikely that a single “Bantu philosophy” can explain everything about the lives of hundreds of millions of Bantu people, who speak roughly 500 different languages and live throughout virtually all of sub-Saharan Africa. Césaire has no doubt that Tempels’s real purpose was to find any argument that would justify Belgium’s rule and help the public think their government was benefitting the people of the Congo. Belgian rule in the Congo was one of the most brutal instances of colonialism anywhere: the Belgians killed at least five million native Congolese people. (The Belgians were famously required to murder enslaved rubber workers who did not meet quotas and bring these workers’ severed hands with them as proof; when these quotas proved impossible to reach, they started cutting off hands at random.)



The French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni, who lived in Madagascar, similarly justified colonial violence by insisting that certain people simply have a “dependency complex” and need to be controlled. His theory made “the most absurd prejudice” seem reasonable, “as if by magic.” Mannoni thought that while Europeans’ desire to conquer represented a progression through “civilized forms,” or passing through “initiation rights” into “manhood,” non-Europeans had no psychological need for such progress. In other words, Mannoni was repeating the common argument that nonwhite peoples, like children, don’t really want or appreciate freedom. When asked to explain actual nationalist rebellions in Madagascar, Mannoni blamed “purely neurotic behavior, a collective madness” in response to “an imaginary oppression.”

To Césaire and modern-day scholars, Mannoni’s argument is just as absurd and unjustifiable as Gourou’s or Tempels’s: he simply asserts that Europeans have a natural need to dominate people and Africans have a natural need to be dominated, which implies that French colonialism in Madagascar must be legitimate. Mannoni does not make an argument for some racist conclusion; rather, he accepts unprovable ideas about racial difference as the basic assumptions of his argument, and then uses this argument to justify colonialism. By dressing up racist assumptions in the complex academic language of psychoanalysis, Mannoni made them seem acceptable and intelligent to the European ruling classes whose power depended on believing in them.



The commonality among Gourou, Tempels, and Mannoni is that they all tried to erase the actual material violence that was happening on the ground by reinterpreting colonialism through ideas, “comfortable, hollow notions” like “the dependency complex,” Bantu philosophy, and “tropicality.” Nevertheless, the politicians and capitalists who orchestrated colonization progressively opt for “less subtle and more brutal” tactics, including open and flagrant racism like that of the writer M. Yves Florenne, who thought that exquisite French biology was under threat from the contact with foreign people brought about by colonialism. He said this after World War II, but he knew that he was borrowing from Hitler’s ideas. Césaire insists that his readers should not “be indignant,” but should rather “resign ourselves to the inevitable” and accept that the bourgeoisie will always to grow “more shameless” and “more summarily **barbarous**” as history progresses and European societies gradually lose power.

By examining the work of these three scholars, Césaire comes to an unsettling conclusion about the true purpose of early anthropology and the danger of university research in general. Especially in the social sciences, no research is completely neutral or independent of material interests. It always serves some purpose, and the political and career commitments of the people who write it inevitably affect the conclusions that come out of it. Gourou, Tempels, and Mannoni are more like mercenaries than scientists, and their work should serve as a cautionary warning to contemporary scholars, students, and readers: academic knowledge can only be understood in relation to its time, place, and concrete purpose.



SECTION 5

Césaire compares capitalist society to “a beast” that feasts on people and argues that it has lost control in the 20th century, growing unhealthy but remaining just as cruel and sadistic. It is not the Nazis’ fault, but rather has a deeper source. Césaire cites the Comte de Lautréamont’s hit book *Chants de Maldoror*, a controversial collection of nightmarish and satanic poetry, as evidence of how central this cruelty has become to European culture. While many critics interpreted the book through “occultist and metaphysical commentaries,” the book is actually a “scarcely allegorical picture of a society in which the privileged, comfortably seated, refuse to move closer together so as to make room for the new arrival.” Lautréamont’s protagonist represents the Western bourgeoisie that is responsible for all the violence of recent history and finds itself experiencing “*progressive dehumanization*” as a result.

Césaire again emphasizes that the corruption and violence of European colonialism are inseparable from capitalism: because industrialists wanted profit and the best way to achieve it was to take resources by force and enslave people rather than pay them, expropriation and violence became the norm. While many contemporary students learn that the self-reflective experimentation of modernist and postmodernist literature reflects an increasing instability in moral values and concepts of humanity, Césaire offers the slightly different interpretation that this literature, like the Chants de Maldoror, was specifically addressing the corruption of European culture due to capitalism and colonialism. In other words, like Hollywood movies that focus on the hollowness of stardom, this literature reflects bourgeois Europeans’ realization that they have accidentally brought “progressive dehumanization” upon themselves.



Césaire turns to another influential figure, the anthropologist Roger Caillois, who believes himself responsible for correcting ethnographers who increasingly see non-Europeans as equal. Caillois and many other academics (like the essayist Henri Massis) believe that “the West alone knows how to think” and that nonwhite people are “incapable of logic.” They maintain this belief even though their primary source, the French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, retracted his argument and instead concluded that “these [non-European] minds do not differ from ours.” Caillois also conveniently forgets all the innovations of non-Europeans: Egyptians invented “arithmetic and geometry,” for instance, and Islamic philosophers were rationalists long before European ones were.

Beyond wrongly believing in white people’s intellectual supremacy, Caillois also sees them as morally superior because he thinks that they have greater respect for life and dignity—but again, he believes this only because he conveniently omits the crimes they have committed. (Césaire points out that, at the very time he is writing, white Frenchmen are torturing people in Algeria and Morocco.) Next, Caillois also sees European Christianity as inherently superior to non-Europeans’ “voodoo type” religions, because of Christianity’s “dogmas and mysteries,” “symbolism” and “glory.” Caillois concludes that “the only ethnography is white”—meaning that only Europeans are worthy of studying others. But Césaire accuses Caillois of acting as though anthropological **museums** full of stolen artifacts are somehow an adequate recompense for colonialism. Rather, Césaire concludes, it would have been better for Europe to leave non-European **civilizations** intact and vital rather than tearing them apart and making museums out of the pieces.

Like the work of Gourou, Tempels, and Mannoni, Caillois’s anthropology advances a racist picture of the world, in which white people are inherently superior to nonwhite people and therefore have some natural right to dominate them. The crucial difference is that Caillois is trying to defend these other thinkers’ racist scholarship against a backlash among other writers who, like Césaire, pointed out that it is self-serving and academically dishonest. In other words, while Gourou, Tempels, and Mannoni were using racist social science to justify colonialism, Caillois is using racist social science—namely, the idea that white people are better at science, logic, and knowledge—to justify racist social science. He thereby explicitly argues for the assumption that implicitly lies behind Gourou, Tempels, and Mannoni’s work: Europeans’ beliefs and opinions about non-European people are more valid than non-Europeans people’s knowledge about themselves. This idea remains popular in contemporary anthropology, whose proponents often end up speaking for the people they study precisely so that those people cannot speak in their own voices.



Césaire has already established the formula for colonial propaganda, so it should not surprise his readers that Caillois also seems to follow it: he says the opposite of the truth—that European empires have been benevolent rulers—in order to justify actual exploitation and genocide under colonialism. While 21st-century readers might easily dismiss Caillois’s claims about the relative superiority of the Christian religion because they are based on pure prejudice, this does not mean that this kind of European cultural supremacist thinking does not still have profound effects in the present day. The museum is an important example: present-day museums in European capital cities like Paris, London, and Madrid are still full of objects (ranging from gold and diamonds to indigenous art and clothing) that were illegally looted during colonialism and should be the rightful property of the now-independent former colonies from which they were stolen. However, museums refuse to give these objects back. This shows not only how universities (and anthropologists in particular) still cite the sanctity of scientific knowledge in order to perpetuate inequalities that originated in colonialism, but also how they continue to believe that Europeans (and a few other national groups, like Americans and Australians) have a greater capacity for knowing about Asia, Africa, and Latin America than the people who actually live in those places do.



Still, “Caillois is moderate” compared to other Europeans because he doesn't believe in genocide. This is not because Caillois believes other groups deserve to live, but merely because he wants to be generous—but he can retract this generosity at any time. Caillois argued that unequal groups of people should not have “an inequality of rights,” but instead that the powerful have “an increased responsibility.” Césaire thinks it is clear that he means the responsibility for “ruling the world.” Césaire clarifies that Caillois's philosophy was not particularly insightful or valuable, but that it nonetheless represents the way countless Europeans think, specifically “the Western petty bourgeoisie.” Ironically, while they praise humanism, “the West has never been further from” it.

By pointing out that Caillois is at once inexcusably racist and also “moderate” compared to many members of the European elite, Césaire again underlines the extent to which white supremacist perspectives are baked into the foundations of European culture. Caillois's conclusion—that people are unequal by nature, but should be equal in society—is a common point among contemporary social scientists (although, tellingly, virtually only white ones). However, it is incoherent for two reasons. First, there is no solid evidence behind it: Caillois has no proof that white people are naturally better thinkers and scientists than nonwhite people, just like no contemporary scientist has ever been able to prove this in the several decades since. Second, it is incoherent to say that some people are better than others by nature, because determining what is “better” requires having certain cultural beliefs about what is desirable and undesirable. (For instance, in individualistic, capitalist societies, it may be assumed that having a higher IQ—or analytical intelligence—is inherently better, but other societies might value emotional intelligence and empathy instead.) Caillois ends up justifying colonialism by saying that Europeans know what is best for non-European people, while those people do not know what is best for themselves—which is clearly a self-serving justification for colonialism



SECTION 6

“Man” and “the nation” are both bourgeois values, Césaire begins, and their inventors are the colonial nations that now threaten to destroy the whole world, including Europe itself. Although he recognizes that “historical parallels” are unreliable, Césaire considers this similar to how Rome destroyed itself after destroying the rest of the ancient world, and he quotes the historian Edgar Quinet, who pointed out that Rome believed it was uniting humanity precisely when its expansion was undermining the other **civilizations** that surrounded it. These other civilizations had previously buffered Rome from invaders, but once they fell, Rome collapsed inward on itself. Europe is doing the same thing.

In this concluding section, Césaire returns to his central argument: European colonialism was a capitalist project to exploit non-European resources and people through whatever means necessary, and it was supported by writers, scholars, and other propagandists who were paid to justify this exploitation through any ideology they could formulate. Because of the contradiction between this exploitation and the ideology it generated, Europe had to take increasingly drastic measures to hold onto this power, and eventually it spiraled out of control and imploded through the two World Wars. Césaire's comparison between Europe and the Roman Empire serves not only to predict the fall of European imperialism, but also to challenge his readers to question the way that empires and the atrocities they commit are remembered: they are celebrated when they should be condemned, and readers must in turn ensure that European empires are remembered for their cruelty and corruption, in part so that their crimes are not repeated in the future.



Now, the United States believes it is the next global empire—while it publicly decries colonialism, it is busy colonizing the world through investment. Césaire warns the world against seeing the United States “as a possible liberator” and declares that its global economic expansion is a “machine for crushing, for grinding, for degrading peoples.”

If Western Europe does not support the rebirth of cultures in its colonies, Césaire concludes, it will forever fall into “immortal darkness.” Saving Europe requires “the Revolution,” which promises to create “a classless society” led by the proletariat, rather than the bourgeoisie.

Césaire wants to ensure that his readers know that colonialism has morphed, rather than disappeared, since World War II: the United States’s global economic power allows it to exploit resources and labor overseas through policies virtually identical to the ones Europe used from the 15th to 20th centuries. In other words, colonialism has entered a new phase: it is based on a globalized market economy that no longer requires explicit state support. Césaire believed that readers must remain aware of how colonial exploitation continues and strive to identify and protest the political strategies and intellectual discourses that support it.



In closing, Césaire again calls specifically for people to fight and support anticolonial, anticapitalist revolutions in Africa and Asia. These revolutions were well underway when he was writing in 1950, but their success was far from guaranteed, and it was even less certain that they would create the equal, free, and economically communalist societies Césaire wanted to see, rather than reproducing the inequalities created by capitalism. While he continues to think that Europe in its present state is “indefensible,” this does not mean it is beyond salvation: it could always decide to support movements for independence and popular sovereignty in its former colonies, even if this was unlikely. Ultimately, while Césaire’s desire for decolonization largely did get realized in the following decades, few of the new nations that formed made very much progress toward the “classless society” that many continue to fight for today.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Jennings, Rohan. "Discourse on Colonialism." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 2 Mar 2020. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Jennings, Rohan. "Discourse on Colonialism." LitCharts LLC, March 2, 2020. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/discourse-on-colonialism>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Discourse on Colonialism* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press. 2001.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 2001.