

Keynote Speech: Colonial-Capitalism and Its Impact on Natural Resources in The Colonised World

Ucaptama: Kolonial-Kapitalisme dan Kesannya terhadap Sumber Alam di Tanah Jajahan

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ABSTRACT

This keynote speech was delivered at the International Conference on Interdisciplinary and Strategic Studies (ICRIS) on August 12, 2021. It explains the concept of colonial-capitalism and highlights the importance of understanding the underlying logic of capitalism behind the praxis of colonialism. From the middle to late stages of colonialism over the past 500 years, the underlying logic of colonial conquest continued to evolve. Initially, it was the Crusades that prompted the Europeans to start their exploration but then it was the conflicts and competition among the European powers themselves that galvanised their desire to conquer the world. This speech also illustrates how colonial-capitalism has changed our view of nature and our human relationship with the natural world, which in turn has influenced how we manage our natural resources. It concludes by reflecting on how we are still living in the long shadow of the 19th century and why the struggle for mental liberation continues until today.

KEYWORDS

Colonial-capitalism,
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ABSTRAK

Ucaptive ini disampaikan di Persidangan Antarabangsa dalam Kajian Rentas Disiplin dan Strategik (ICRIS) pada 12 Ogos 2021. Ia menghuraikan tentang konsep kolonial-kapitalisme dan menekankan kepentingan memahami logik kapital yang mendasari kolonialisme. Dari peringkat pertengahan sehingga peringkat akhir penjajahan sejak 500 tahun yang lalu, logik penaklukan penjajah berubah. Pada mulanya, Peperangan Salib telah mendorong bangsa Eropah memulakan pengembaraan mereka tetapi kemudiannya konflik dan persaingan sesama merekalah yang mencetuskan keinginan mereka untuk menakluk dunia. Ucaptive ini juga menggambarkan bagaimana kolonial-kapitalisme telah mengubah pandangan kita terhadap alam dan hubungan manusia dengan alam, seterusnya mempengaruhi bagaimana kita mengurus sumber alam. Ucapan ini disimpulkan dengan merenung bagaimana kita masih hidup dalam bayangan abad ke-19 yang panjang dan mengapa perjuangan untuk pembebasan minda berterusan sehingga hari ini.

KATA KUNCI

Kolonial-kapitalisme, Sumber alam, Dunia yang dijajah

1.0 Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank the organiser of this event, the IRIS Institute for inviting me to discuss a topic which I think is very important in the context of international politics during this era. We can begin by looking at the current COVID-19 pandemic and can clearly see that there is a huge gap between the developed and developing countries, particularly in the vaccine procurement process. This is due to the evident wealth gap between developed and developing countries, between East and West, which is one of the legacies from the period of colonialism and imperialism in the 17th, 18th, 19th and early 20th century to this day. My argument is that even though the colonial era is over, and we do not see the flags of the Western empires flying in our region, this gap in power, economy and capital still exists; and because of that, countries in Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia, Africa, and other regions are still chasing after the West in order to try to close this huge gap. We cannot, therefore, deny the fact that even when colonialism has formally ended, we live in the reality of a post-colonial world where so many effects of colonialism still persist. One of the lasting effects is the colonial economic logic and the way we manage our economies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and others.

2.0 Colonial-Capitalism

Here I will be using the term 'colonial-capitalism', which was coined by Syed Hussein Alatas and other historians. Today I would like to talk about the logic of colonial-capitalism, and will argue that we cannot meaningfully speak, write and study the history of colonialism and imperialism without touching upon the subject of capitalism, or looking at how the logic of capitalism was one of the drivers of the colonial enterprise.

Let us start with a simple premise. In this era, when historians, analysts and writers write about the history of Western Colonisation in Asia and Africa we often get the impression that the colonialism era started with the rise of Spain and Portugal and how the Spanish and Portuguese went out of Europe and discovered the American continent. We tend to assume that this period - beginning from the European exploration era up to the 20th century - was an era that is somehow homogeneous, as if colonialism's logic remained the same over the course of 500 years. My argument here is that such a view is not really accurate. Yes, there were some similar characteristics like how the European countries grew strong, developed their economies as well as their energy and military power to conquer the world. However, it is reasonable to think that the mentality has changed during those 500 years. We must

remember that when the Europeans started their exploration, they went to Africa, Asia and America. When the West Europeans began to explore beyond the borders of the European continent in the 16th century, they were emerging from a prolonged religio-cultural struggle against their oldest and closest civilisational neighbours, the Arab-Muslim world. European expansion and exploration during this period came at the tail end of a long religio-political conflict and brought with it the vocabulary of religious conflict and cultural-civilisational antagonism. So, because of that, when we read the writings of the Spanish and Portuguese explorers who came to Southeast Asia during that time, for example Antonio Pigafetta who wrote about Ferdinand Magellan's voyage to the Philippines, we see that what drove this process is the desire of the European powers to destroy and dismantle the international economic system that had been developed by Asians and more importantly to break the trade monopoly dominated by the Muslim merchant community.

We can see from Pigafetta's writing that, at that time, the colonisation process was driven by the perception of an external threat whereby the Islamic civilisation was seen as a rival or competitor to the European civilisation. However, the process changed in the early 17th century with the 30 Years War (1618-1648) in Europe when the European powers fought among themselves. This is a fact that we need to remember, and never forget. One of the driving factors behind Western colonialism and imperialism was the competition between the European powers themselves. The rise of Spain and Portugal intimidated other European countries, particularly the British, Dutch and French who feared that Spain and Portugal would eventually become the strongest and richest countries in Europe. Seen in this light, we can argue that European expansionism and eventual colonisation of Asia and Africa was the result of intra-European rivalry, rather than rivalry with the established polities and powers of Asia and Africa per se.

2.1 An Extraordinary New Phenomenon

The 17th century marked a turning point in the historical evolution and development of Europe. We observe a new phenomenon whereby capital was put to work to serve the interest of nation-states, and also the rise of militarised capitalism for the first time. This is the beginning of the kind of supranational capitalism that we know today. The existence of new entities such as the Dutch East India Company is an interesting event because in the history of humanity, there has never been an incident like this whereby an independent company was established by merchants who were empowered to conquer other territories to raise capital in order to bring riches to the country itself. This was the time when a new philosophy, economic nationalism emerged in the form of companies with military capabilities, turning them into militarised capital entities. This has never happened before. Nowadays we see unusually large companies such as McDonalds, Google, Microsoft and others but Microsoft does not have its own army. McDonalds does not have its army and we are not forced to buy its burgers. They do not have armies to conquer us. However, in the 17th century, a unique phenomenon appeared, the spirit of economic nationalism that established independent companies with the power to conquer other territories for the sake of their countries.

The spirit of economic nationalism is encapsulated in the form of these companies and it was during this time that we see the existence of such companies not just the Dutch East India Company, but also the British East India Company, Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales (French: French Company of the East Indies) and the Compañía de las Indias Orientales Españolas (Spanish: The Spanish East Indies). So, one by one, these European countries realised that in order to expand their territories they have to utilise the combination of capital and military capability. These two powers combined together that led to the emergence of this extraordinary phenomenon. We know the history and what happened in not only our region but also in South Asia, India and others. We see those who conquered India and invaded Burma as well as interfered in the political affairs in Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, were not the Dutch, English and Spanish governments but these companies. For instance, the British East India

Company went to India and started to control the areas of Bengal and Kolkata then became stronger until North and South India also eventually fell into its hand.

This is indeed a remarkable circumstance. If you want to know more about this, there is an interesting book written by the scholar Peter Carey. Peter Carey (from Oxford) wrote about the British in Java. I think it is a very fascinating book and a very important one. Maybe one day we can have a discussion about this book, 'The British in Java, 1811-1816'. This book is particularly interesting because Peter Carey illustrated how the British East India Company had modified the economy in Java to the wishes of the company. Let us not forget that Java was occupied by the British East India Company (in the name of England) for six years from 1811 to 1816.

3.0 The Relationship Between Colonialism and Capitalism

There are two points that I want to convey. If we want to understand the logic of colonialism and imperialism in the 18th, 19th and 20th century, we cannot deny the fact that the colonial process was driven by the logic of capital accumulation. The relationship between capitalism and colonialism is very close for two reasons.

3.1 Nominalism

The first reason is the changes of perceptions of the Asian society about nature and the relationship between human beings and the natural world. There were many changes that occurred but I want to emphasise on two critical aspects. First, the changes happened at a nominal level. This is what we call nominalism which is how the way we recognise this material reality around us changes with the existence of new vocabulary. When these companies came to Southeast Asia, our relationship with nature changed because it is not considered something natural but viewed as a commodity. Nature has become a commodity. So, when we see the hills, mountains, rivers, trees in the jungle, they are no longer seen as natural phenomena but as commodities to be developed and exploited. Commodities that can be collected and exploited then used to fulfil the needs of the imperial economy. Thus, our relationship with nature changed with the arrival of this new vocabulary. And this nominalism reflects the relative difference in power or power differentials between the coloniser and the colonised people.

There is a very interesting book on this topic and I think it is important for our discussion today, 'The Conquest of America' written by Tzvetan Todorov. In this book, Todorov focused on the language and discourse used by the colonial power especially the Spanish when they conquered America. His argument is that the violence that occurred was not just at the material or physical level. Not just genocide and destruction of indigenous cities in America, but it began with the language itself when the continent was named as 'America'. Thus, the identity of the community has also changed. They were given a different identity which is the European identity. They cannot even name themselves. Their own names, their lands and whatever is in their earthly realm were changed and given Latin names, Spanish names, Portuguese names and so on. This also happened in Southeast Asia till today. For instance, there is still a debate going on whether we should use the name Georgetown for Penang because we know Tanjung was there before that. So, why do we use such names? This is the main aspect of colonial-capitalism which is nominal changes that occurred with the arrival of these colonial companies. It changes our relationship and the way we interact with nature. The earth is no longer 'Mother Nature' but it becomes private properties that can be bought by companies.

3.2 Colonialism: Mind, Body and Land

This brings us to the second aspect. When we discuss about colonialism, the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, it is undeniable that in certain cases like what happened in Burma, Perak, India and China,

there were great conflict of wars. For instance, there was the Battle of Plassey in Bengal and the three Anglo-Burmese Wars in Burma. Burma was conquered by the British after three wars; the First, Second and Third Anglo-Burmese Wars. The first war was in 1824-1826, the second war lasted for two years in 1853-1855 and the third war occurred in 1885. There were indeed great wars, fierce battles with huge armies. Thousands died when the British invaded Java as the company's army attacked and bombarded Jogjakarta city.

However, behind these atrocious wars, there is another aspect that is more subtle in which the colonisation is successful not just because of the violence used but when the colonised societies accepted the colonial-capitalism logic introduced by the colonisers. Ibn Khaldun wrote about why and how colonisation can be successful. Colonisation is successful when the colonised society blindly accept the coloniser's logic. And this is what happened in Asia and Africa, because not only did these Western powers gained victory in the wars but the defeated and colonised society then accepted the logic and praxis of colonial-capitalism as their own logic and economic praxis. And when we read about the role of the British East India Company in Sumatra written by John Anderson, he does not want the company to interfere in the Malay politics in Sumatra but he was so happy he could persuade the Sumatran people to use the company's British currency. In other words, they adopted the colonial economic system. And this is very important, we must remember that colonialism does not simply happen through violence but there are other ways which are more subtle and cunning including economic colonisation.

3.3 The East-West Technological Gap

The western powers wanted to expand their imperial colonial zone throughout the world because of the conflicts in Europe. The British, Dutch and French feared that their neighbours, Spain and Portugal will dominate the world as imperial powers. In a nutshell, their conflicts, wars and battles became a problem for the whole world especially because they reap the riches from Asia and Africa to develop their own economy and technology. When the Spanish and Portuguese came to Southeast Asia, the technological gap between East and West was not very large. Alfonso de Albuquerque the Younger, the son of Alfonso de Albuquerque noted that after the invasion of Malacca, the Portuguese made an inventory of the weapons used by the Malay soldiers and found more than 3000 rifles and other assorted missile weapons like cannons. He also pointed out that the technology of the rifles used by the Malay soldiers in Malacca back then in 1511 was as good as the riffles made by the weapon producer in Gottingen, Germany at that time. So, the level of technological advancement was almost the same in Asia and Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries.

However, as the European countries invaded Asia and Africa, reaping the riches to grow their economies and became powerful, the level of technological advancement between East and West changed. Europe became more advanced, more sophisticated whereas Asia dwindled. As we reached the 18th and 19th century, we could no longer keep up with the West. Look at what happened to Brunei, when the British invaded Brunei with rockets and armoured gunboats, such technology did not exist in Asia at that time. It is like how America is using the drones now. There was no way that the societies of Asia and Africa could possibly compete with the Western powers that enjoyed such a huge advantage in terms of advanced weaponry.

4.0 Conclusion

The sophistication of Western technology today is due to the wealth gained from the colonisation of Asia and Africa. And for this reason, I think we should remember that the international political and economic situation we see at the moment is not something natural. There is nothing natural about the

status quo in today's international political order. If the Western countries are so developed today, it is partly because of the legacy of colonialism that facilitated them, their previous generations helped to develop their economies. We are still behind and we are still chasing them because we want to get to the same level. I believe this raises a question, a theoretical and ethical question for us. What is the model of development for Asia? Because when we see the reality of this age, the whole world has accepted the same hegemony including those countries that were in the communist bloc back in the 50s-80s. China today, for instance, may be led by an ostensibly Communist party, but its economy is, for all intents and purposes, a capitalist one. We see that the former Soviet Union has disappeared but Russia nowadays also follows the same logic. In short, the whole world is following the same logic.

We are still living in the long shadow of the 19th century. Our model of development is a model based on the logic of capital-driven development, whereby we cannot be a developed country without capital as the primary driver for development. We can see this around the globe from Europe to Asia and Africa. Look at what is going on with our environment, the pollution and all the destruction of nature. The debate about climate change and global warming has been going for decades. We have been talking about pollution, rising temperatures and rising sea levels for 20, 30 years. These are all the implications of colonial capitalist hegemony from the 18th century till today. So, this is a logic with longevity spanning more than 300 years. Therefore, it is not easy to change this logic but we must begin by asking some questions. How do we get to this level? What are the factors that has brought us to this point in our history? And one of the factors is the legacy of colonialism as I mentioned earlier. We cannot talk about colonialism without touching on the topic of capitalism as well.