Revista de Lenguas Modernas, N° 12, 2010 / 57-64 / ISSN: 1659-1933

"An Outpost of Progress": the Inequality of the Empire and the Reversal of Power

Anthony López Get
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas
Universidad de Costa Rica

Abstract
This article analyzes both the power relations between the colonized subjects and the colonizers and the ideal of nation imposed by the europeans over its African subjects in Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress." We study how the invaders succumb to the impossibility of adapting to the prototype colonizer, and how a colonized character takes advantage of this situation in order to reverse, in a subtle way, his subordinated position.

Key words: Joseph Conrad, nation, empire, ideology, power relations, post colonialism

Resumen
Este artículo analiza las relaciones de poder entre los sujetos colonizados y los sujetos colonizadores y el ideal de nación impuesto por los europeos sobre sus súbditos africanos, en la obra "An Outpost of Progress" de Joseph Conrad. Se estudia cómo los personajes invasores sucumben ante la imposibilidad de amoldarse al prototipo del colonizador y cómo un personaje colonizado toma ventaja de esta situación para invertir, de forma sutil, su posición subordinada.

Palabras clave: Joseph Conrad, nación, imperio, ideología, relaciones de poder, poscolonialismo

This is the empire, Clive. It's not me putting a flag in new lands. It's you. The empire is one big family. -Caryl Churchill-Cloud Nine

Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" criticizes the ideals of civilization and progress that the European empires imposed upon their colonies. As a steamboat commander in Congo, Joseph Conrad experienced

Recepción: 29-8-08 Aceptación: 18-7-10

the extent of the European—Belgian in this particular case— imperialism over the region and its consequences over the colonized peoples. The Belgian influence over Congo started with Leopold II in 1870 as a way "to ensure [Belgium's] prosperity" by means of the establishment and exploitation of colonies in the region, which had a "considerable economic potential" ("Congo"). Similarly, other European Empires, that found in Africa a source of wealth and workforce, embarked on a colonizing enterprise into the "Dark Continent." The military and economic power of the European Empires gave them the power to invade, colonize, and appropriate other territories they found profitable arguing a responsibility for the protection, enlightenment and civilization of the so-called primitive people in the world. Colonialism is defined as "a political-economic phenomenon whereby various European nations explored, conquered, settled, and **exploited** large areas of the world" ("Colonialism" emphasis added). The word "exploited" is emphasized since the Empires' true agenda lies in the exploitation of the human and natural resources of the colonized territory. However, the colonized peoples are not the only ones who suffer from the Empire's mistreatment. More than a "big family," echoing Caryl Churchill, "An Outpost of Progress" presents the Empire as a discordant group of people with totally different cultures, ideals, backgrounds, and realities, in which not only the colonized but also some colonizers are alienated from the ideal of the European subject and considered second-class citizens with no value for the kingdom rather than as work force. Although the story presents two *white*, European men that are in charge of the outpost, it reverses the positions of power by giving Makola, a civilized African, the tools to manipulate Kayerts and Carlier, two foolish colonizers, from a subordinated position denouncing the Empire's unequal use of its subjects as mere objects of civilization replaceable at any moment.

Empires are born of the desire of powerful countries for economic and military expansion—colonialism—supported by ideals of nation and civilization pre-established and imprinted by the Ideological State Apparatuses[11] on their subjects. These ideals are discursive constructions, ideological conceptions without a geographical or physical basis – what Timothy Brennan calls, "…an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined" (49). However, this abstraction unifies people to the point that they "die for nations, fight wars for them, and write fictions on their behalf" (49). Benedict Anderson refers to the concept of nations as "imagined communities" since, in spite of the differences between the members of a nation and the fact that they will never know all of their fellow citizens, they share a feeling of communion and brotherhood (6). In the same line of thought, Ernest Geller mentions that "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist" (qtd. in Anderson 6). This imaginary union, along with an alleged Western superiority, permitted—and still permits—some powerful countries to embark on a quest of cultural, economic, and military domination over so-called inferior or less developed countries.

Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism,* refers to Imperialism and its implications. He mentions that, "At some very basic level, imperialism means

thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others" (7). The word "others" used by Said is not gratuitous since it connotes that the Empire and its members view themselves as *the ones* or *the center*, and the colonized as *the others, the margins*. Moreover, Michael Doyle views Imperialism as "a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence" (qtd. in Said 9). Similarly, the Encyclopædia Britannica, in its definition of Empire, states that this form of control "always" uses force, be it armed or "some subtler form." Although military power represents an important and usually effective tool of domination over weaker countries, ideological domination is an even more effective—and less expensive—means. In this respect, D.K. Fieldhouse proposes that "the basis of imperial authority . . . was the mental attitude of the colonist. His acceptance of subordination—whether through a positive sense of common interest with the parent state, or through inability to conceive of any alternative—made empire durable" (qtd. in Said 11). Similarly, Robert J.C. Young explains how "… those in such situation [of subordination] come to internalize this view of themselves, to see themselves as different 'other', lesser" (21). Ideological domination makes the colonized people believe not only in their inferiority but also in their dependence on the Empire whether economically, culturally, or politically; however, it also makes *the others* believe that they can become part of *the center* one day, driving them to accept their subordinated position in hopes of a better future. Furthermore, as the imperial ideology must convince the colonized subjects of their inferiority, it also must convince its actual subjects that the quest for domination is a duty of the civilized countries and not a mere economic or political enterprise. Said mentions that,

> There was a commitment to them [imperialism and colonialism] over and above profit, a commitment in constant circulation and recirculation, which, on the one hand, allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated, and, on the other, replenished metropolitan energies so that these decent people could think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples. (10)

Obliged, as Empires claim to be, to educate and protect the alleged uncivilized and underdeveloped countries, the advanced cultures subjugated, enslaved and exploited their colonies instead.

One of the main tools that the Empires use to indoctrinate and to spread their ideologies is through literature, more specifically the novel. Timothy Brennan states that "the novel brought together the 'high' and the 'low' within a national framework-not fortuitously, but for specific reasons" (52). It not only represents the ideal citizen and nation, but also the imperial advantages and duties. The problem with the novel is that it is not always as effective to bring the "high" and the "low" together as Brennan claims, since not only economic

resources but also education limit people's access to this information; therefore, the "second-class" citizens and the colonized have little or no access to literature whether in favor or against the Empire.

In "An Outpost of Progress," education and literacy play a primordial role in the power relations. The colonizers, Kayerts and Carlier, have access to propagandistic novels in favor of the Empire and believe in their role of civilizers; however, it seems that Makola's education deceives them and helps the supposedly inferior character alter the power relations in the outpost without aggressively confronting the Empire. Moreover, the Empire, represented by the Director of the Company, does not care about the welfare of its employees and, on the contrary, leaves them alone in the wilderness. Among the books Kayerts and Carlier found in the station—books that belong to their predecessor—there is colonial propaganda that "spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth" (11). Kayerts and Carlier, in their role as colonizers, believe in their importance for the Empire. They, as fellow citizens, think they are part of a group of heroes that help poor underdeveloped countries to become a little more civilized—in Western terms—although that must be achieved through slavery. They dream about a future in which people will think of them as "the first civilized men to live in this very spot" (12). However, they ignore that their lives are of no interest or importance to the Empire and that their intellects are inferior to that of Makola. When they feel that the Empire has abandoned them—because the company has more important stations than theirs—they rebel against it. The narrator says: "Meantime Kayerts and Carlier lived on rice boiled without salt, and cursed the Company, all Africa, and the day they were born" (26). By cursing the company, they are also cursing the Empire's colonizing enterprise, and by cursing the day they were born, they are cursing the moment in which they became part of the imperialistic project that put them in that terrible position. In this way, Kayerts and Carlier recognize the fake union and brotherhood that the imperialistic project promulgates, as they were abandoned for being considered unworthy, unfit for the Imperial standards of a citizen.

From the beginning of the story, the description of the white men is merely physical, and even this kind of description tries to make fun of them: "There were two white men in charge of the trading station. Kayerts, the chief, was short and fat; Carlier, the assistant, was tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a long pair of thin legs" (Conrad 3). In contrast, Makola is described as an African man with some level of formal education: "He spoke English and French with a warbling accent, wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping…" (3). As opposed to Gobila's people, who view the whites as some kind of gods and find entertainment in playing with matches, Makola has a higher level of education—Western education—that, along with the knowledge of his own culture and territory, places him in a vantage position. At the beginning, two possible explanations for this difference in the depiction of the characters might be inferred: the first one is that the intellectual superiority of the whites

is taken for granted. The second one is that the two white men are so ignorant that there is no intellectual characteristic that can be attributed to them, while the level of education of Makola is superior. However, as the story continues, the text exposes Kayerts and Carlier as useless individuals with no value for the purposes of the Empire. The Director says:

> Look at those two imbeciles. They must be mad at home to send me such specimens. I told those fellows to plant a vegetable garden, build new storehouses and fences, and construct a landing-stage. I bet nothing will be done! They won't know how to begin. I always thought the station on this river useless, and they just fit the station! (5)

Kayerts and Carlier mean nothing to the company and the Empire, and they were sent to an outpost that is of no use. The Empire will not send valuable people to an outpost that does not have an economic, military, or cultural importance; on the contrary, the Empire sends unimportant people whose life or death will not affect its machinery. But the inefficiency of Kayerts and Carlier is due also to the education and control that the Empire exerts over its subjects. They were raised as "civilized" people who live in a "civilized" country and under civilized conditions; therefore, they became spoiled children of the mother state, unsuited for the life in an "uncivilized" land: "they were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals. Whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds . . . the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion" (6). Civilization transforms them into useless people outside the security of the Imperial structure. Outside its boundaries, in the wilderness, they do not have the support of this structure and feel unprotected and isolated. They are, as the text suggests, conditioned or programmed to act as machines because ideology is implanted on them. They are forbidden from, or even incapable of, "all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine . . . under pain of death" (8). Now they are set on a foreign, wild, and uncivilized outpost and are invested with the power of the Empire in order to keep the station under control; however, the power becomes an enormous responsibility for a pair of incompetents, a situation that exposes the flawed nature of the Empire's structure.

According to Michel Foucault, an essential part of the power relations lies in the productivity of the part in control. He says that "what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (61). Kayerts and Carlier are sluggish, uneducated and unable to adapt to their new environment. They lack control and authority over their subalterns; therefore, their power turns "unproductive", in Foucauldian terms, and end up failing in keeping the station in order. Makola takes advantage of this failure in the power structure in order to take that power back. Foucault explains that in power relations there are several codifications and that revolution is one of them. He says,

> … there are many different kinds of revolution, roughly speaking, as many as there are possible subversive recodifications of power relations, and further that one can perfectly well conceive of revolutions which leave essentially untouched the power relations which form the basis for the functioning of the state. (64)

Makola recodifies the power relations in the station. He does not rebel overtly. He keeps his role of the subordinate African worker, but in fact, he is the one who possesses the control. He is in charge of the trade and functions as the intermediary and the translator between the two cultures since he speaks not only the Western languages but also the African ones. While the whites are not accustomed to the environment of the African wilderness, Makola is at home. But probably the most important element of Makola's power is his intellectual superiority mentioned before. The white men declare that "Makola is invaluable" (19). This statement represents how the Empire sees a "civilized nigger." However, what the Empire is unable to see is that Makola holds the power while making them (the Empire and its subjects) believe they still have it. Makola has also the power and control over the lives of the colonizers. He says that the first white person in the outpost died of fever; however, one can assume that he provoked the death of the man or that he didn't do anything to prevent it, since he threatens Kayerts with a similar death when the latter yells at him: "You very red, Mr. Kayerts. If you are so irritable in the sun, **you will get fever and die, like the first chief**' . . . but his words seemed to Kayerts full of **ominous menace**" (21 emphasis added). What Makola says is that he provoked the death of the first chief and that he can provoke Kayerts' also. Furthermore, when Kayerts kills Carlier, Makola suggests him to pretend that his victim "died of fever" (31). The Western people do not know anything about Africa, and there is superstition and misinformation surrounding the territory, its people, and even its diseases. Kayerts, talking about the death of their predecessor, tells Carlier that "The climate here, **everybody says**, is not at all worse than at home, as long as you keep out of the sun" (7 emphasis added). Makola takes advantage of the whites' predispositions regarding Africa and blames the fever for the death of the Western colonizers who, incidentally, are not used to the African weather. At the end, the death of both whites assures Makola a momentary control of the outpost while the company finds another puppet with whom he will probably play.

"An Outpost of Progress" challenges the ideal of Empire as a civilizing process, in which the power looks for the welfare of its colonies, by presenting it as an imaginary, ideological construction. There is no brotherhood in the Empire but a mere search for benefits and profits regardless of human losses. Moreover, the story challenges the idea of the African subject as a wild "brute" or ignorant beast of burden whose slavery is a low prize to pay for the expansion and protection of the Western power. The same tools of domination (ideology and education in this case) become the weapons that Makola, the "civilized nigger," uses against the Empire and its subjects in order to survive. Even though Makola must live under the shadow of the Imperial rule, he manages to subtly impose his own rules and

to control, by means of knowledge and sagacity, those that are supposed to control him. The last image of Kayerts sticking out his tongue at the Director of the company represents what the whole story is about: a mockery of the Empire's use of human beings, not as subjects but as objects for its purposes, and the rebellion of these subjects as they recognize their position as human beings.

Notes

1 The Ideological State Apparatuses, a concept coined by Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," comprehends all the institutions of a given state (e.g. the school, the church, the family) that are in charge of instructing the subjects to behave and think according to the established ideology. Althusser explains, "the individual in question behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which 'depend' the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject" (167).

Bibliography

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

Anderson, Benedict. Introduction. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nations*. By Anderson. Rev. ed. London-New York: Verso, 1991.

Brennan, Timothy. "The National Longing for Form." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. New York: Routledge, 1994.

"colonialism, Western." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 18 Apr. 2009.

"Congo, Democratic Republic of The." *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. 6th ed. 2007. Questia. 26 Apr. 2009 <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=112852913>.

Conrad, Joseph. "An Outpost of Progress." *'Heart of Darkness' and Other Tales*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Churchill, Caryl. "Cloud Nine." *Plays: One*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Foucault, Michel. "Truth and Power." *Foucault Reader*. Trans. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

"imperialism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 18 Apr. 2009 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/283988/imperialism>.

"Joseph Conrad." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 11 May. 2009 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/133148/Joseph-Conrad>.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

Young, Robert J.C. *Post-Colonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.