Colonialism in Question

Instructor: Pavel Barša

There are two views of modern European colonialism. According to the first view, it is a regrettable deviation from the civic equality and enlightened modernity that European nations were able to establish on their soil. The other view opposes this idea of colonialism as something excisable from the otherwise unproblematic European modernity and locates it, rather, at its very core. The proponents of this perspective, who are concentrated mostly in what is known as post-colonial theory, have the tendency to reject not only colonialism but also Enlightenment universalism that supposedly backed the coercive modernization of non-European societies.

This course is devoted to the reading of the book by Frederic Cooper Colonialism in Question. Cooper is sympathetic to the idea of inseparability of the history of modern European nations from the history of their colonial empires but, at the same time, disagrees with sweeping conclusions of postcolonial theory: rather than to confer a causal weight to abstract entities such as “modernity”, “colonialism” and “Enlightenment” he suggests to attend to concrete ways of treating indigenous populations by different colonial regimes. Instead of seeing the relation between colonizer and colonized exclusively in terms of either subjugation or liberation we should be able to grasp various kinds of interaction in which the colonized were very often able to appropriate concepts and practices of their masters and use them for their own empowerment. Cooper’s book tries to outline the ways how to analyze modern colonialism as actual historical process made of innumerable decisions and interactions of concrete people rather than a grand march of abstract forces (such as “modernity” or “Enlightenment”) or entities (such as the “West”) through History.

The first part of the course will develop this general line of criticism of post-colonial theory. The second part will be devoted to the assessment of analytical weaknesses of its three major concepts - “identity”, “globalization” and “modernity”. In the third part an alternative approach will be outlined – at first in general terms, and then in its application to the rise and fall of the French Empire in Africa.

1. Introduction
4. Ibid. Ch. III, Identity, pp. 59-75.
5. Ibid. Ch. III, Identity, pp. 75-90.
6. Ibid. Ch. IV, Globalization, pp. 91-100.
7. Ibid. Ch. IV, Globalization, pp. 100-112.
9. Ibid. Ch. V, Modernity, pp. 131-152.
11. Ibid. Ch. VI, States, Empires, and Political Imagination, pp. 171-203.
12. Ibid. Ch. VII, Labor, Politics, and the End of Empire in French Africa, pp. 204-230
Requirements
Participation in class discussions, one oral presentation of readings and final written examination.

International Exchange students may gain an ECTS grade in this course.

Course Material