

SINGAPORE SYMPOSIUM IN LEGAL THEORY

Why Colonialism is Wrong

BY Dr Massimo Renzo, *King's College London*

Commentator: Patrick Taylor Smith, *National University of Singapore*

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FACULTY OF LAW, NUS (BUKIT TIMAH CAMPUS)

ABSTRACT

What is wrong with colonialism? Lots of things, obviously. Historically, colonial occupations have involved subjecting innocent populations to atrocities such as murder, torture, exploitation, sexual violence, forced relocation, and enslavement. But pointing at these wrongs is not enough to explain the distinctive way in which colonialism is wrong. After all, murder, torture, exploitation, sexual violence, forced relocation, and enslavement are wrong whether or not they occur in the context of colonial occupation. If all we can do to explain the nature of colonialism is point at the fact that it typically involves the perpetration of these crimes, we cannot vindicate the thought that there is something distinctively wrong with colonial domination, a wrong that cannot be reduced to the systematic perpetration of these more familiar crimes. And yet many seem to share this thought. Intuitively, the members of former colonies seem to have suffered a distinctive wrong over and above the wrongs associated with murder, exploitation, enslavement etc. To make sense of this intuition, in this paper I offer an account of colonialism that appeals to the idea that colonial domination undermines the capacity of political communities to exercise their self-determining agency in a particular way. When political communities are treated in this way, there is a distinctive wrong that is perpetrated against their members, independently of whether this treatment is accompanied by any of the other wrongs listed above. This wrong is what we need to focus on if we want to understand the nature of colonialism.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Dr Massimo Renzo is a Reader in Politics, Philosophy & Law at the Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London. Previously he was an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick and before that a Lecturer at the York Law School. He has held visiting appointments at the Australian National University, the universities of Virginia and Arizona, the Centre for Ethics and Public Affairs at the Murphy Institute (Tulane University) and Osgoode Hall's Nathanson Centre for Transnational Human Rights, Crime & Security. He is an affiliated researcher at the Stockholm Centre for the Ethics of War & Peace and the Honorary Secretary of the Society for Applied Philosophy. He is also one of the editors of the journal *Criminal Law & Philosophy*. His articles have appeared in journals such as *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Analysis*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Legal Theory*, *Law & Philosophy* and the *Journal of Political Philosophy*. He has co-edited the volume *The Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights* (OUP 2015) and the five volumes of the *Criminalization Series* (OUP 2010-4).

Participation is By Invitation Only

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