



Decolonizing the Mind: The Case of the Netherlands

Sandew Hira

International Institute of Scientific Research, the Netherlands

sandew.hira@issr.nl

Abstract: In a militant context, the author examines certain dominant historical narratives regarding slavery and abolition produced and disseminated in the Dutch university and Dutch governmental institutions. He denounces their ideological and non-scientific approaches and in particular their strong tendency to understate or deny the oppressive character of slavery and the responsibility of Dutch ruling classes in its promotion and in mystifying the historical factors that explain abolition.

This article deals with the distinction between science and ideology in the field of the history of colonialism in the present day multicultural society of Holland. I will argue that there is a dominant ideological current in Dutch universities that tries to portray colonialism as a normal form of social relations between human beings rather than a system of exploitation and oppression. I label this current *scientific colonialism* which is comparable to the current of scientific racism that tries to justify racism with pseudo-scientific arguments.

The central question in this discussion is: what was the nature of colonialism and of the European civilization that created it? The scientific challenge comes down to formulating a theoretical framework that helps us to answer these questions. Such a

framework needs to be logical (consistent) and it must be formulated in propositions that can be checked by factual information. From an ideological point of view the whole discussion is not about theories and facts, but about defending (or attacking) colonialism in disregard of theoretical constructs and facts. I will deal with three major exponents of the current of scientific colonialism in Holland: the late Professor R.A.J. van Lier, Professor P.C. Emmer and Professor G. Oostindie of Leiden University.

I. The Colonial Society as a Plural and Frontier Society: A Critique of R.A.J. van Lier

My basic criticism of Emmer and Oostindie is that they lack a theoretical framework to understand colonialism; I will

Sandew Hira, a.k.a Dew Baboeram, studied economics at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. In 1982 he published his first book on the history of struggles against colonialism in Suriname from 1630-1940. Since then he has published more than 20 books and numerous reports and articles on the history of Suriname and the position of migrants in Holland. He initiated the web-based database on indentured labour in Suriname, a digitized version of the immigration register containing detailed data on 70,000 immigrants from India, Java and China to Suriname between 1853 and 1939. He co-produced three historical documentaries on Suriname with director Ivette Forster. He is currently working on a 40-volume Encyclopaedia of the Colonial History of Suriname 1948-1954. Hira is director of the International Institute for Scientific Research (IISR) in the Netherlands.

return to this point. Van Lier, however, did try to formulate such a theory. He wrote a major study entitled *Frontier Society: A Social Analysis of the History of Suriname* (1971)¹ in which he seeks to study “the social relations which were important in determining life in the Colony. These relations came about as a result of the joint striving of a group of people to attain certain objectives, and of their views testifying, in doing so, to a mentality which was connected with certain given situations” (p. 2).

In order to explain the very existence of the colonial society, van Lier goes back to a classical concept in western sociology, which is to explain social relations as a result of a joint striving of groups of people. However, from a scientific point of view one needs to test a theory. Where is the evidence that the slaves from Africa and their masters from Europe jointly decided that they would enter into a social relation whereby the former group is enslaved by the latter? Where are the data that shows that the slaves and their masters jointly agreed that the first group was to be branded with hot iron so that the latter was ensured that the slave was his property? Where is the proof that both slaves and masters agreed upon a judicial system—the slave laws—that specified how the first group should be controlled, degraded and punished by the latter?

If the central core of van Lier’s argument is that colonial society can be understood through the concept of ‘joint striving’ a scientific methodology requires that one provide the data to build his case. Van Lier has written a voluminous book, but he has provided no facts to confirm his central thesis? Every student of slavery and the colonial society knows that there is no such evidence. But still the book is hailed by

¹ R.A.J. van Lier, *Frontier society. A social analysis of the history of Surinam*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971.

Professor Gert Oostindie as a ‘*masterly*’ piece of work, not because of its scientific value, but because of its ideological content (Oostindie 2009: 3).

In line with the concept of ‘*joint striving*’ van Lier develops another concept, that of the border-line situation, explained as follows:

Generally speaking, groups or individual persons may be said to live in a border-line situation when their environment has lost its trusted, familiar character, so they are placed in a situation in which they lack the feeling that they are making a satisfactory adjustment. Because both slaves and their owners had been uprooted and had to adjust to conditions which were new and unfamiliar to them, both groups continuously lived in a border-line situation. (Van Lier 1971:7)

The concept of border-line situation tries to explain tensions between social groups without recourse to the concept of oppression and exploitation. Both groups are set on an equal footing: both are uprooted and have to adjust to the new situation; the actions of and interactions between these groups can be explained by their continuous adjustment to the border-line situation.

A scientific methodology requires theoretical consistency. In this case it requires that the historical development of the colonial society in Suriname be explained in terms of these adjustments. So in order to elucidate the very foundation of the colonial society—which is slavery—van Lier should have analyzed the mechanism that placed the different groups in comparable situations and make it clear that indeed these situations are on equal footing. Since he does not do that at all, he fails to meet the scientific requirement of theoretical consistency. And indeed, his

concept of the border-line situation would have great difficulty in explaining the slave trade that led to the establishment of the slave society in Suriname. Of course, every student of slavery knows that the slaves and their masters did not arrive in Suriname independently of each other. There was no independent third force that brought these groups into the new situation. Their arrival was linked to each other. The masters forced their slaves into the new situation.

If the establishment of a border-line situation was a result of the actions of the master, it is no surprise that the continuation of that relationship was not a matter of independent actions of the different groups, who were intrinsically linked to each other.

The theory of van Lier does not attain the scientific standard of providing empirical evidence for one's proposition and maintaining theoretical consistency. That, of course, is not a sufficient reason to disqualify his study as unscientific and ideological. The process of scientific research and development consists of continuously trying to develop consistent theories and supporting them with empirical evidence. Even a wrong theory is part of the scientific process. But when a (fallacious) theory develops into a set of ideas that regulates one's conduct, it becomes ideology. Van Lier has not produced a work of science but a work of ideology.

In his analysis of the social tensions in the 1930s in Suriname he compares the uprisings in the West Indies with the struggle of the workers in Suriname in the same period. He writes:

In Surinam, however, the distress is not assuming as gloomy an aspect as on the overpopulated West Indian islands, as long as the volume of the aggressiveness of the masses does not increase and is not triggered off by the fear of starva-

tion outbursts such as those which occurred in the British territories in 1937 are not to be expected.

Such outbursts always continue to constitute a serious threat, however, even when the masses are not acting out of dire necessity, because once these have been sparked, they may go beyond a certain point as a result of violence on the part of the police, at which the collective rage can no longer be suppressed and can only be checked at the cost of the loss of lives and damages to property. *Responsible leaders* will have to realize fully that with the *mental instability* of the masses such as it is they will have to allow themselves to be guided by strong feelings of responsibility when making political propaganda, and that too free a manipulation of the fury of the masses in order to gain *certain political ends* carries with it grave dangers for the whole of society, not least of all for the masses themselves. Political leaders will have to teach the people to direct their energies through *democratic channels*. They will have to teach them self-confidence and train them to develop their critical faculties in order to enable them to form independent judgments in political matters; they will at the same time have to instill a sense of order and responsibility into them. (Van Lier 1971:376; emphasis added.)

Three elements in this citation give us insight into the ideology of van Lier. The first is the idea of mental instability: you must be out of your mind if you protest against colonialism. The second element is the norm he sets for responsible leadership. Responsible leaders have to instill in the masses a sense of order and responsibility

towards the colonial power. A leader that mobilizes masses against colonialism is seen to be manipulating them for the political end of which he does not approve. The third item is the false characterization of the political structure in the colony. Van Lier urges responsible leaders to use democratic channels to express their actions. But he curiously fails to mention that these channels were absent in the colonial period. Universal suffrage in Suriname was introduced in 1948. Before that year only a few hundred people, mostly whites and a few people of color, could elect the colonial parliament. Press freedom and freedom of organization were restricted. Colonialism was characterized by the absence of democratic channels. By producing a false representation of the colonial reality, van Lier goes from science to ideology.

Van Lier directed his criticism specifically at Anton de Kom, the leader of the uprising in 1933 in Suriname of a broad sector of society—immigrants and descendants of slaves—against the colonial authorities. He tried to organize these workers but was arrested and banished to Holland. De Kom is now a national hero in Suriname. The university is named after him. Books, articles and events are organized in his honor. He wrote a classic book entitled *We slaves from Suriname*, which is a passionate critique of colonialism. His perspective in writing the book is the struggle against oppression, exploitation and racism.

The evaluation of De Kom by Van Lier shows once more how his work is more ideological than scientific. Here is what van Lier has to say about De Kom:

The book *Wij Slaven van Suriname* (We Slaves from Surinam), which he wrote after his return to the Netherlands in 1933, offers an excellent insight into De Kom's mentality. Although it is generally assumed that the book owes its ex-

istence to a considerable degree to the collaboration of a Dutch man of letters who moved in the same leftist circles as De Kom, the influence of the mentality of the group which had produced De Kom is unmistakable. De Kom attempted to write a study of the history of Suriname in which the accent fell on the slaves and the lot of the lower classes. The result was a work the chief value of which is as a document which offers an insight into the mentality of the lower middle class Surinamer. The memory of the sufferings endured by the ancestors as slaves, which is still alive among the common people, can be detected in his words. But this memory became part of a pathetic sense of grievance and a rancor which, however much justified by the circumstances in which the lower classes found themselves, prejudice a proper insight into the past. (Van Lier 1971:370)

Van Lier tries to discredit De Kom by suggesting that he was not the author of the book, but he offers no proof of this and relies on the assumption that a black man in the 1930s could not have written such an anti-colonial study. Studying the handwritten manuscripts would have provided proof that De Kom indeed wrote the book, but Van Lier and others who have repeated the accusation never bothered to study the manuscript. The material is now accessible in the National Archives of Suriname.

The lack of a consistent theoretical framework corroborated by facts is the first major feature of scientific colonialism. Its second striking feature is the method of discrediting an author without offering proof. A third aspect of van Lier's judgement is that he describes the sharp criticism of slavery as a system of exploitation and oppression as a "pathetic sense of griev-

ance and rancour which... prejudice a proper insight into the past” (Ibid.). And that proper insight is that slavery was not a system of oppression and exploitation but a frontier society where “relations came about as a result of the joint striving” (Ibid.:2).

II. RACIST PROPOSITIONS BY P.C. EMMER

The propositions of P.C. Emmer of Leiden University, with whom I will deal now, echo the racist view that was common in slavery and described by the renowned Jamaican planter Edward Long (1734-1813) who wrote a history of Jamaica in 1774. Long states that the African is somebody that is in a lower state of humanity and causes disgust in a human being who observes such an animalistic creature. Slavery saved them from the barbarism in Africa. He also states that slaves who were guided by the spirit of freedom were not so guided by logical and independent thinking or philosophizing, but because their sentiments were ideologically ignited by the fever of the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century in Europe. They lacked any concept of freedom found in other human beings. He describes an African man who has obtained some education but is merely a parrot without a mind capable of independent thought.²

Emmer has produced a 21st-century version of the same ideas. He writes about the situation of enslaved people as follows: “Although the new society they had entered very often knew harsher psychological conditions, in material terms they were better off than in Africa.”³ Thus, slavery saved the enslaved from worse

material conditions in Africa. In fact their lives were improved by the transfer to the “New” World.

What are the scientific problems with this proposition? First, there is the lack of a theoretical framework and the use of implicit assumptions about the nature of the slave system. The description of the slave system is disconnected from the major features of its historical context:

- The enslaved people were never asked for their permission to go to another place where the material conditions might have been better. This is a matter of fact, not of speculation. They were transported by force to another place where the material conditions might have been better.
- The enslaved people lived under oppression and exploitation; there is absolutely no relationship between the number of calories in the diet in the Americas and the fact that they lived in a system of exploitation and oppression. Nor is there any logic in assuming such a relationship.
- Emmer does not provide any basis for his figures. He just assumes them. So let us start from that assumption. If the diet in the colonies was so great, how did it come to pass that during the whole period of slavery in Suriname 350,000 Africans were brought into Surinam and at the end of slavery only 34,000 were left? In a normal population with a healthy diet the size of the population only grows. If we leave out, as Emmer does, the systematic oppression that killed the enslaved Africans, then there must

² See F. Dragtenstein, *Alles voor de vrede. De brieven van Boston band tussen 1753 and 1767* (Everything for peace. The letters of Boston Band between 1753 and 1767), Amrit/NiNsee, The Hague/Amsterdam 2009, p. 16.

³ P.C. Emmer, *De Nederlandse slavenhandel 1500-1850* (The Dutch slave trade 1500-1850). *De Arbeiderspers*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen 2003, p. 250-251.

have been something really bad in their diet. The whole method of reasoning is illogical.

But Emmer's proposition is not about logic and facts. Its intention is to present slavery not as a crime against humanity, but as a system that was better for the slave. This is ideology, not science.

As mentioned above, Emmer repeats the statement by Edward Long that the slaves had no concept of freedom. If they did, they took it from the French Revolution. In a description of the slave revolt of 1795 in Curacao under the leadership of Tula he writes:

Tula referred to the liberation of the French slaves and to the fact that the Netherlands should also liberate its slaves as the country had been occupied by France. There is no doubt that the Curacao slave rising of 1795 had its roots in abolitionism in Europe and was not based on a separate abolitionist ideology originating in the Caribbean. (Emmer 2003:16)

In another paper he states: "There is no indication that either the insurgent slaves or the maroons ever had the intention to abolish slavery and to strive towards general slave emancipation."⁴

He continues:

The fact that the slaves did not strive to abolish slavery does not indicate that the slaves in the Dutch Caribbean were not interested in more freedom to manage their own time. They wanted time to tend their own gardens, to sell

their produce at other plantations or at slave markets, to go fishing and hunting and to own guns, to visit relations at other plantations and to stay away from their plantation from time to time. And in many ways, the slaves had their way.⁵

He dwells on the matter:

It is becoming clear that the iron grip of the owners and managers of the slaves was far more limited than originally believed. The slaves were actually very successful in creating family life, in building social relationships (sometimes far beyond the boundaries of the plantation), in ensuring that their children would be given functions that carried some degree of prestige within the plantation, in following their own religious predilections, and in creating their own economic framework within which as consumers and producers they could make their own decisions."⁶ [...] But, if the slaves did finally revolt, it was not to combat or put an end to the institution of slavery.⁷

Why would the slaves not be interested in their freedom? According to Emmer:

The economic advantages of slavery allowed the slaves to have higher incomes in kind such as better food, clothing, housing and medical care. Without the free labour ideology from Western Europe and North America, the slave trade to the Dutch Caribbean as

⁴ Pieter Emmer, "Who abolished slavery? Resistance and accommodation in the Dutch Caribbean," *Paramaribo*, May 11th-15th 2008, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

well as slavery would have lasted much longer than it actually did.⁸

Now we know: black people have missed a great opportunity with the abolition of slavery.

What are the scientific problems with these propositions? First, there is the problem of logic. If there were no written documents of enslaved people in which they explain their notion of freedom, that does not mean they did not have such notions. It only proves that we are lacking documentation. It is simply illogical to assume that the notions were absent, simply because Emmer has not found the documents. In fact there is ample documentation of the concept of freedom by the enslaved people. The 1795 uprising is very well documented.⁹ Indeed Tula did refer to the abolition of slavery in France. But he also referred to the successful revolution in Saint Domingue (Haïti) where the slaves liberated themselves by force. And most statements by Tula explicitly stated that they wanted nothing less than their freedom as human beings. Emmer could not have missed these statements, because they were all there in the documents he has consulted.

The scientific problem with this is that there is no factual proof that the 10-12 million human beings who were taken captive in Africa against their will and forced to work without payment in the colonies saw branding “as proof that their new owners would care for them.” This is nothing more than ideology without facts. But here we come across another major feature of scientific colonialism: it simply ignores the available facts to make an ideological point. The concept of the African as an animal is implicit in the

following statement by Emmer about the branding of enslaved Africans. Branding took place twice, he writes: “once when they boarded the European slave ship, and once at the end of the journey when they arrived at the plantation... They saw it as proof that their new owners would care for them.”

By this time, any civilized reader would be disgusted by Emmer’s racist account: black people lacking any notion of freedom; enslaved Africans who liked slavery; women, men and children who saw branding as a proof of the love of their master. This is hard-core racism at work at Leiden University. To be honest, however, I have less of a problem with the racism than with the lack of any scientific basis for these assertions. As for its racist content, I stand by the defence of the freedom of speech: everyone has the right to be an uncivilized bigot. If that is the highest level of civilized conduct that that individual or institution can attain, so be it.¹¹

III. GERT OOSTINDIE AND THE DISCUSSION ON THE WILLIAMS THESIS

Slavery is now officially recognized by the United Nations as a crime against humanity, just as the Jewish Holocaust is recognized as a crime against humanity. Who committed the crime against the Jews? There is no doubt about its perpetrators: thousands of books, films and documentaries have implanted the truth in the minds and hearts of the Europeans—it was Nazi Germany. But what about slavery? Here we see the fourth major feature of scientific colonialism: Western civilization

⁸ P.C. Emmer, op. cit, 2008, p. 19.

⁹ See A. Caine (ed.), *Tula. De slavenopstand van 1795 op Curaçao* (The slave uprising of 1795 on Curaçao), Amsterdam/Den Haag, NiNsee/Amrit, 2009.

¹⁰ P.C. Emmer, *De Nederlandse slavenhandel 1500-1850. De Arbeiderspers* (The Dutch Slave Trade 1500-1850), Amsterdam/Antwerpen, 2003, p. 252.

¹¹ When Emmer retired, Leiden University organized a farewell congress in his honor.

is not portrayed as the perpetrator of this crime against humanity, but rather as the liberator from this hideous crime.

Emmers asks: "Who abolished the slave trade and slavery?" His answer is: "The governments in Europe, and the USA, Cuba and Brazil. The abolition of slavery was a typical feature of Western civilization."¹²

And I ask: "Who instituted the slave trade and slavery?" My answer is: "It is the government and private companies in the west who instituted slavery. The institution of slavery was a typical feature of Western civilization!" My next question is: "Why did the western governments and private companies institute slavery? And what was their role in the abolition of slavery?"

The question of why slavery was abolished is basically the question about the nature of European civilization: if slavery was abolished on humanitarian grounds, then this would indicate that European civilization has attained a high level of decency. On the other hand, if slavery was abolished for economic reasons, then the level of decency of the western civilization is astonishingly low.

The discussion centres on Eric Williams' thesis. Williams formulated the following conclusions about slavery and abolition in his study *Capitalism and Slavery*.¹³

1. The decisive forces in the period of history are the developing economic forces.
2. The various contending groups of dominant merchants, industrialists and politicians, while keenly aware of immediate interests, are for that very reason generally blind to the long range consequences of their various actions, proposals

¹² Pieter Emmer, "Who abolished slavery? Resistance and accommodation in the Dutch Caribbean," *Paramaribo*, May 11th-15th 2008, p. 1.

¹³ University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

and policies.

3. The political and moral ideas of the age are to be examined in the very closest relation to the economic forces.
4. An outworn interest, whose bankruptcy smells to heaven in historical perspective, can exercise an obstructionist and disruptive effect which can only be explained by the powerful services it had previously rendered and the entrenchment previously gained.
5. The ideas built on these interests continue long after the interests have been destroyed and work their old mischief, which is all the more mischievous because the interests to which they correspond no longer exist.¹⁴

From Williams' perspective economics led to the institution of the system of slavery and economics led to its abolition, which implies a devastating judgement about the nature of Western civilization.

The attacks of scientific colonialism centre on criticizing the Williams thesis. The main critique involves two arguments:

1. If economics were the reason for abolishing slavery, then after abolition of slavery the economies of the colonies would have grown. If growth was absent, then the reason for abolishing slavery was not economic.
2. There was a large movement of people in Britain who campaigned for the abolition of slavery. They were the expression of a high level of civilization because they put human decency above economics. Britain committed economic suicide, or econocide as Seymour Drescher puts it.¹⁵

¹⁴ E. Williams, 1944, p. 209-213.

In Holland the critique of the Williams thesis was repeated by Gert Oostindie. In a reader he edited, in which different historians and economists describe how after abolition of slavery the colonial economy declined,¹⁶ he asks why slavery was abolished in the Dutch colonies. His answer: "It was due to an absolute indifference regarding slavery rather than economic arguments."¹⁷

The scientific problem with the economic critique of Williams is a question of logic. A motive is independent of the outcome of a policy but is linked to its intention. So even if the economy declined after abolition, this has nothing to do with the motive. The motive should be linked to the intention, not to the outcome of an act. From a scientific point of view, then, even if the colonial economies grew or declined after abolition it does not bear on the motives of the policy makers. A growing economy would not have been an indicator for the bad morals nor is a declining economy an indicator of good morals.

So we thus return to the second argument against Williams: the impact of the abolitionist movement. Here we encounter what I call the abolitionist contradiction in the history of slavery. The contradiction bears on the concept of justice and civilized behaviour. When a crime is committed—and we are talking here about a major crime in human history—civilized conduct prescribes that the perpetrator be punished and the victim be compensated. What was the outcome of the policy of abolition? Slave owners were rewarded—they got the

money—and the enslaved Africans were forced to work for another historical period as bonded labourers, although not as slaves.

The abolitionist contradiction goes as follows: if slavery was abolished by the abolitionists, then that would attest to their uncivilized nature. They were racists who punished the black people for slavery and rewarded the perpetrator of the crime against humanity. If the abolitionists had high moral standards and refused to accept such an outcome, then apparently their influence on policymaking was not so great.

Thus, the critiques of the Williams thesis clearly suffer from two problems: a methodological one—how to link a motive to the outcome of a deed instead of the intentions of the policymakers—and a logical one: the abolitionist contradiction.

The Dutch have an additional problem. Oostindie acknowledges that Holland lacked the broad abolitionist movement that was present in Britain. There was no significant abolitionist movement in Holland, just a few individuals who clearly had no influence on policymakers. However, the outcome of the policy in Holland was exactly the same as in Britain: slavery was abolished with similar conditions.

If there are no economic reasons to abolish slavery, because of the perceived economic decline,¹⁸ and if there was no moral pressure on politicians, then why was slavery abolished in Holland? Oostindie's answer is: "absolute indifference regarding slavery." To which I reply: absolute nonsense!

Why? It is just illogical to label *indifference* as a motive for an action, because indifference means that the policymaker does

¹⁵ See Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977.

¹⁶ Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity on the Dutch Orbit*, 1995, KITLV Press.

¹⁷ Gert Oostindie, *De parels en de kroon. Het koningshuis en de koloniën* (The pearls and the crown. The monarchy and the colonies), KITLV uitgeverij Leiden/ De Bezige Bij Amsterdam 1006, p. 29-30.

¹⁸ I do not dwell on the nature of the economic decline after abolition. Suffice it to say that indentured labourers were imported on a mass scale to save the plantations in some major colonies!

not care about the outcome of his action. If that is so, why did he not choose the easiest way, namely, to maintain slavery and keep the economic gains? Why should indifference lead to such a drastic step not only of abolishing slavery, but also of setting up an enormous system of importing 70,000 indentured labourers between 1853-1940 to replace 34,000 enslaved Africans who were “freed” in 1863? There is no logic that explains such actions from the motive of *indifference*.

Lately Oostindie has come up with another argument besides *indifference*, namely peer pressure, that is, the phenomenon where individuals in a group commit acts under the pressure of peers.¹⁹ In the case of the abolition of slavery, the Dutch, who fought four wars against the British, would have bowed under British moral pressure. Oostindie does not mention military or economic pressure.

My scientific critique is twofold. First, there is just no factual proof of peer pressure. Oostindie does not bother to produce any evidence of it. In fact, if we go to the source, as historians should do, then we find that there was a state commission that wrote a report in 1853 for the preparation of the abolition in 1863. The report clearly cites economic reasons for the abolition of slavery:

- The decline of the slave population (around 2% per year) would lead to a shrinking supply of labour.
- The proportion of unproductive slaves (children and elderly people) was rising.

The commission concluded that although the colony would yield less than in previous years, abolition would enable the colony to exist. The way would be

¹⁹ The argument was used in a public debate that I had with Oostindie on October 25, 2009, in Amsterdam in the hall of Ons Suriname.

cleared for the import of a more flexible form of labour supply: indentured labourer. The commission did not use any moral arguments regarding the enslaved Africans. In fact, they argued that the cost of the abolition—the rewards for the owners, the perpetrators of the crime—should be paid by the slaves! They admitted however that they could not think of ways to enforce such payments.²⁰

IV. THE MECHANISMS OF (DE)COLONIZING THE MIND

In my view, leading professors in the Dutch universities who write about slavery and colonialism are not scientists but ideologues of colonialism. The striking features of scientific colonialism are:

- The lack of a consistent theoretical framework that is corroborated by facts;
- Suggestions made without proof;
- The rejection of any characterization of slavery and colonialism as systems of oppression and exploitation;
- Ignoring facts that contradict their position in order to make an ideological point;
- Portraying Western civilization not as the perpetrator of a crime against humanity but as the liberator in the hideous crime.

Their approach however should be seen from a broader perspective of the colonization and decolonization of the mind. I will argue that colonialism has developed

²⁰ See G. Willemsen, *Dagen van gejuich en jubel. Viering en herdenking van de afschaffing van de slavernij in Nederland, Suriname en de Nederlandse Antillen* (Days of joy and jubilation. Celebration and commemoration of the abolition of slavery in the Netherlands, Suriname and the Dutch Antilles), Amrit/NiNsee, Den Haag/Amsterdam, 2006, p. 78 ff.

concepts and relating mechanisms by which the mind of the colonizer and the mind of the people that were colonized have been moulded to accept and propagate colonial ideas. These ideas still exist and have an influence in universities in the west and sometimes in its counterparts in the former colonies.

I will examine ten concepts and relating mechanisms of colonizing and decolonizing the mind:

These are:

- 1 The concept of inferiority of the non-western culture and the superiority of western culture linked to colour.
- 2 The concept of self-humiliation of the coloured people and self-glorification of the white people.
- 3 The concept of gratitude for colonialism.
- 4 The concept of mitigating the nature of colonial oppression and exploitation.
- 5 The concept of destroying the cultural identity of non-whites.
- 6 The concept of divide and rule.
- 7 The concept of equal culprits in the crime against humanity.
- 8 The concept of forbidden chambers.
- 9 The concept of applause instead of discussion.
- 10 The concept of the house Negro and the field Negro.

1. The concept of inferiority of the non-western culture and the superiority of western culture linked to colour

Slavery and colonialism were justified, according to this concept: western culture and the white man were superior to non-western culture and non-white people. Slavery and colonialism were meant to uplift the non-whites from barbarism. This idea has permeated every sector of the colo-

rial society and the western civilization. Decolonizing the mind means analyzing the mechanisms that have been used to imprint this concept in our mind and finding ways to remove it from our consciousness.

Let us look at a few examples:

- Language: in our language colour is linked to norms and values. The colour white is linked to good, pure and positive connotations. The colour black is linked to bad, dirty and negative connotations. So when we talk about good and bad and link it to colour, then the colonized mind would view black as bad and white as good.
- Culture: every year on the fifth of December the Dutch celebrate *Sinterklaas*—Santa Claus. During *Sinterklaas* children get presents from their parents and schoolmates. There is a whole culture of rites and rituals including songs that celebrate *Sinterklaas*. One remarkable aspect of this feast is the use of blacks—*Pieterbaas*—who run around with candy and dress like fools. Children sing songs with lyrics like: “*Even though I am black as coal, my intentions are good.*” And nobody feels ashamed at the annual insults that creep out of children’s mouth during *Sinterklaas*. Generally speaking, in popular culture there is abundant material—from Tarzan movies to comic strips—that depicts black as backward and white as superior.

Decolonizing the mind means breaking this tangible link between colour and the judgement about good and bad. In present day culture the link is more and more made between religion and the judgement about good and bad. The Muslims are today’s Negroes.

2. The concept of self-humiliation of the coloured people and self-glorification of the white people

The establishment of a link between colour and judgment spills over into the next concept. Non-whites learn to talk and think of themselves in negative terms (self-humiliation) and of whites in positive terms (“they are the best”). Whites learn the opposite: they are taught that they are the best (self-glorification) and that there is always something inferior and wrong with the non-whites.

The most remarkable example of self-glorification of the white race can be found in the image of Jesus, a white man with blond hair and blue eyes. In 2001 the BBC broadcasted a documentary titled “Son of God.” Based on historical sources of how people looked like in the Middle East where Jesus was born, they made a computer animation of how God might look like. And not surprisingly he did not resemble a blond man with blue eyes. Such people did not live in Palestine around the year zero. The real picture of Jesus, who is teaching his followers to search for the truth, is far different. Decolonizing the mind means saying good-bye to self-humiliation of non-whites and self-glorification of whites.

3. The concept of gratitude for colonialism

Quite often one might hear the following phrase from immigrants in the western world: “*I am glad that the colonialists took my ancestors from Africa, because if they had not done that, then today we would not live in an affluent society.*” The professors from scientific colonialism propagate this idea. Professor Emmer wrote shortly after the earthquake in Haiti in a leading daily: “If the slave uprising in 1804 had failed and Haiti had remained a colony of France, the

country would now have been better off.”²¹

Apart from the appalling lack of civilized conduct necessary to write such an article during such an enormous disaster, Emmer’s article shows the lack of logic in his proposition. His reasoning boils down to the notion that when event A is followed by event B, then there is automatically a causal connection between those two events: a consecutive order of events is equal to a causal relation between these events. The popular notion in Dutch culture that storks cause pregnancy would have a scientific basis according to Emmer’s reasoning. The arrival of storks at springtime is followed by a wave of pregnancies in the summer. So pregnancies are caused by storks, according to both popular culture and scientific colonialism.

If we apply this reasoning to the Holocaust, we would have to say that the Jews should erect a monument to Hitler to thank him for the Holocaust, because without it the state of Israel would not have existed. There is no need to analyse the Zionists’ struggle to establish the state of Israel. Nor is there any reason to document the Nazis’ motives in order to establish a state for the Jews and institute the Holocaust as a means to further that cause. No scientific research is needed to ascertain the link: the consecutive order is sufficient to create the causal relation.

That is scientific colonialism. In proper science a scientist has to analyse cause and effect. Did Hitler have the intention of establishing a state for the Jews? Did the colonialists have the intention or providing welfare, color TVs included, for the blacks in Britain in 2010? And how were these intentions translated into actions? If that is the case, then there is reason to attribute the effect to the cause. If not, then we are dealing with ideology, not with science. Decolonizing the mind means using scientific means in establishing causal relations

²¹ De Volkskrant, 15-01-2010.

between events and not assuming that these relations exist because of the successive order of events.

4. The concept of mitigating the nature of colonial oppression and exploitation

Scientific colonialists are vehemently opposed to the idea of slavery and colonialism as a crime against humanity, as a system of exploitation and oppression. Oostindie warns against using the phrase “*crime against humanity*.” He argues that it is an “*anachronism*,” meaning that the term is inappropriately used and out of its historical period. Oostindie writes that “few people in the period felt that slavery was a crime against humanity” (2007:18). Oostindie refers only to how the perpetrators of the crime against humanity felt about their action. But what about the victims? Were they not also human beings? What were their feelings about their fate? Would they not view slavery as a crime against humanity? What were their feelings when they were captured against their will in Africa, transported to the Americas and forced to work for free for their oppressors?

Another widespread story in Dutch academic circles is that the Dutch role in slavery was not so bad. This idea is expressed in a statistic: Dutch participation in the slave trade was only 5%, with only 500,000 slaves traded more or less. The share of the Dutch in the crime was not so big so the blame placed on the Dutch should not be so strong.

Scientific colonialism uses the number of 10-12 million people as a statistical indicator for the impact and magnitude of slavery. This is the number of people who arrived in the Americas. Now this number is without doubt huge. Holland has a population of 16 million, Austria of 8 million. The Holocaust took the life of 6 million Jews. So, 10-12 million is a huge number. But still it is a fraction of the number of people that were victims of the

system of slavery in the Americas. A proper calculation of the number of victims should include:

1. Those who perished between the time they were captured and the time they arrived at the ports of disembarkation. There are ratios in the area of 1 to 5, that is, for every person who arrived at the port of disembarkation, 1-5 persons died during the journey (Bosman 1709: 149-150).
2. Those who died during the transport overseas.
3. Those who actually arrived in the Americas.
4. Most important, and often forgotten: those who were born and enslaved at birth, at every generation since the 10-12 million who arrived in the course of 300 years.

These are the sorts of calculations we need in a proper scientific exercise to gauge the impact of slavery. We should also take into account the devastating effect that slavery had on Africa.²² Decolonizing the mind means revealing the true nature of slavery and colonialism as a system of oppression and exploitation.

5. The concept of destroying the cultural identity of non whites

Lord MacCaulay is said to have set out the policy of how to colonize India before the British parliament in 1835: “I don’t think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation that is their cultural heritage²³.” One thing that slavery has tried to do continuously is to destroy the cultural identity of the Africans. Enslaved Africans received

²² See Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London and Dar Es Salaam, 1972.

Christian names. African religions have been replaced by western religion (Christianity). African languages hardly exist anymore. The African heritage is present in music and art, but often it is not recognized as an African heritage. Decolonizing the mind means recognizing the identity that have been lost and the right of black people to regain it if they want to.

6. The concept of divide and rule

Colonialism has taught the workers to pay more attention to what divides them than to what unites them. The colour bar was used during slavery to divide the enslaved people according to the shades of their skin. And for a long time after slavery, blacks and non-whites were taught to look down upon people with darker skin than their own. Africans were pitted against Asians. And this policy still exists to this day, where people from former colonies in the same social economic positions—and indeed white workers in the same social economic position—are taught that division is more important than their unity. Decolonizing the mind means that recognizing and respecting that one's cultural identity can perfectly well go along with striving for unity with other people who live in similar social and economic conditions.

7. The concept of equal culprits in the crime against humanity

One argument in the debate on slavery that keeps cropping up is the role of the Africans in the establishment of slavery in the Americas. The argument goes as follows: Africans helped in establishing

²³ Cited in Speech by Sri Vayalar Ravi, Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs at the International Symposium to commemorate the 135th anniversary of the migration of the Surinamese Indian community in Suriname. The Hague, June 5, 2008.

slavery and thus Africa has an equal moral responsibility in institutionalizing this system in the Americas and is also a culprit in the crime against humanity.

What is the problem in this argument? Any major system of oppression must rely on the cooperation of segments of the group that is oppressed and exploited. It is just not possible to establish large systems of exploitation without such cooperation. The Nazis had their collaborators—that is how they are called—in Dutch society and even among the Jews. These people formed an important part in the process of establishing Nazi domination.

No Dutch historians would dare transfer the responsibility of the actions of the collaborators to the Dutch people as a whole. In fact they are separated in the history books and described as traitors. The Dutch people as a whole are considered to be the victims of Nazis. How different is the approach in the field of slavery. There the actions of the collaborators bear on the shoulders of the victims! Slavery in the Americas did not lead to the industry of shipbuilding in Africa, nor to the rise of the sugar and candy industry in Ghana. The fruits of slavery were not picked in Africa, but in Europe. But still the collaborators are not depicted as traitors by scientific colonialism, and their actions are used to impose the role of accomplice on Africa instead of the victim.

Sharing the blame for instituting the system of slavery has nothing to do with science, but with ideology. Facts are not interpreted from the framework of collaboration but of sharing the blame. Decolonizing the mind means knowing how to distinguish between collaboration and sharing the blame.

8. The concept of forbidden chambers

Scientific colonialism made three subjects taboo in the study of slavery and colonialism:

1. The comparison of slavery with the Holocaust.
2. The question of reparations
3. The effect of the racist ideology that has developed during slavery and colonialism in modern western societies.

Oostindie calls the term “black holocaust” “a conscious provocation. The terminology is an insult to the victims of the Holocaust.”²⁴ In his judgement 300 years of black holocaust (slavery) is not as bad as five years of Jewish holocaust. Oostindie thinks that these two crimes of humanity should not be compared and analyzed, because they are different. But the essence of science—not of scientific colonialism—is the use of comparisons to understand differences and similarities. A scientist should be interested in these differences and similarities. An ideologue does not want the comparison, because the similarities might produce frightening conclusions about the nature of slavery: as a system of oppression and exploitation.

The question of reparations has two dimensions: one is the acknowledgment of slavery as a crime against humanity and the need for western governments to apologize for this crime. The second one is the economic dimension: the need to pay for 300 years of oppression and exploitation.

There is a link between the discussion on reparations and the Williams thesis. We find it hard to believe that western civilization committed econocide—economic suicide—and put their moral values above their economic interest. That is our position in the debate on the Williams thesis. Now there is a chance for honest scientists in the debate on the Williams thesis to show their morality: they should be in the forefront in the reparation movement and defend the argument that indeed western civilization

should repeat the trick of the 19th century: put moral values above economic interest.

On reparations Oostindie states: “Those who apologize accept responsibility and may not be safe for claims”²⁵ He pleads for putting economic interests above moral values.

Many western countries pride themselves that they have gotten rid of racism. The idea that racism still is very much alive in all segments of society is abhorred. Research that links slavery and colonialism to present day racism is prohibited in scientific colonialism. Decolonizing the mind means opening the chambers of taboo in the study on slavery and colonialism and its effects on contemporary societies.

9. The concept of applause instead of discussion

Scientific colonialism has its own rituals. It has developed a culture in which there is no place for fundamental critique and discussion. In its publications one does not find scientific discussions where fundamental differences are debated. They fear public debate and the reason is obvious: any scientific scrutiny would reveal the ideological nature of their argument. And ideologues are not accustomed to debate and discussion. They only appreciate applause. Decolonizing the mind means challenging everyone to engage in fundamental critique of each other. That is the very nature of science: scientists discuss their differences, especially if they have fundamental disagreements.

10. The concept of the house Negro and the field negro

An essential part of scientific colonialism is the role of black intellectuals who play a part as the house Negro, as so eloquently analyzed in a speech by

²⁴ G. Oostindie, *Slavernij, canon en trauma*, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden 2007, p. 7-8.

²⁵ Idem.

Malcolm X.²⁶ In my view, Van Lier is such a house Negro, and Anton de Kom a field Negro. The house Negro is the defender of scientific colonialism in the black communities. Decolonizing the mind means moving towards a level where intellectuals from the former colonies are invited to make their choice. Where do you want to stand on decolonizing the mind—with the house Negroes or the field Negroes?

REFERENCES

- Bosman, W. [1709]: *Nauwkeurige beschrijving van de Guinese goud-, tand- en slavenkust*. (Detailed description of the gold-, tooth- and slave coast of Guinee) Amsterdam.
- Dragtenstein, F. [2009]: *Alles voor de vrede. De brieven van Boston Band tussen 1753 and 1767* (Everything for peace. The letters of Boston Band between 1753 and 1767), Amrit/NiNsee, The Hague/Amsterdam.
- Emmer, P.C. [2003]: *De Nederlandse slavenhandel 1500-1850* (The Dutch Slave trade 1500-1850). De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam/Antwerpen.
- Emmer, P.C. [2008]: *Who abolished slavery? Resistance and accommodation in the Dutch Caribbean*. Paramaribo. 2008.
- Hira, S [1982]: *Van Priary tot en met De Kom* (From Priary to the Kom). Futile, Rotterdam 1982.
- Kom, A. de [1934]: *Wij slaven van Suriname* (We slaves from Suriname). Contact. Amsterdam.
- Oostindie, G. [2007]: *Slavernij, canon en trauma*. Universiteit. (Slavery, canon and trauma) Leiden, Leiden.
- Oostindie, G. [2009]: *Referaat bij Van Lier Lezing Ruben Gowricharn*. (Comment at the Van Lier Lecture by Ruben Gowricharn) in: www.let.leidenuniv.nl/pdf/geschiedenis/vanlierlezing/Oostindie_Referaat_Van_Lier_Lezing_Gowricharn.doc
- Lier, R.A.J. van [1971]: *Frontier society. A social analysis of the history of Surinam*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff.

²⁶ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znQe9nUKzvQ>.