

Book Review:

History Below the Global: On and Beyond the Coloniality of Power in Historical Research

Brenda Kosi Andrias* *History Below the Global: On and Beyond the Coloniality of Power in Historical Research* by Lorenzo Kamel, 2024, Taylor & Francis.

Lorenzo Kamel's *History Below the Global* is a comprehensive historical account compiled through the perspective of those he describes as the "others"—that is, those outside the West. Kamel offers a nuanced view of history before, during, and after colonialism and European expansion. Strategically beginning with a chapter on unlearning, Kamel invites readers to free their minds from the dominant historical discourse that European history is the world history. He skilfully brings to light histories that existed before Western influence spread across the globe. Kamel describes ideas and narratives that have been excluded from mainstream understanding due to the influence of Western powers over academia, media, and public perception. He argues that even in non-Western countries, Western versions of history often override pre-existing knowledge systems, as if world history only began when Europeans entered the scene.

He reveals how the narrative of the so-called "Global South" reinforces a binary of "us" versus "them," effectively othering anyone not part of the West. Yet this construct fails to acknowledge how much the West benefited from the knowledge of the "others." Kamel points out that much of what is now considered Western knowledge originated outside the West, civilisations rooted in the East, such as Greece. Today, however, Greece is often categorised as Western, precisely to claim its intellectual legacy as part of Europe's own. He traces this lineage even further, to ancient Egypt, where some of the earliest records of Greek knowledge originated. He effectively critiques the oversimplification of history by illustrating how knowledge accumulation occurred through the systematic appropriation of non-Western knowledge and traditions.

In the second chapter, Kamel offers a critical perspective on the argument of *The Man of His Time*, a rationale often used to excuse some of the most horrific acts committed by Europeans in their colonies. He begins by showing how Immanuel Kant's notion of Enlightenment laid the ideological groundwork for colonialism and helped justify slavery and the mistreatment of non-White peoples. Kamel then challenges the view that the destruction brought by colonialism can be explained away using the argument that it is somehow unfair to judge historical figures by today's moral standards. He points out that not only were there dissenting views on slavery, but colonised peoples were also actively resisting European intrusions during the very period that slavery was expanding. Therefore, acts of genocide, massacres, and the mutilation of children in the Belgian Congo, for example, cannot be excused with the *Man of His Time* defence.

Kamel argues that the knowledge gained through colonisation was used to control and influence the colonised—most notably by creating divisions among groups to destabilise societies and open them up to manipulation. In the third chapter, Kamel discusses slavery in all its horrific manifestations in Africa and the Americas, showing how control was made possible through a detailed understanding of the people. Armed with insights into their vulnerabilities, Europeans wreaked havoc, deliberately fostering divisions to advance their agenda of divide and conquer.

What is more, the abolition of slavery was initiated by slaves themselves, yet this is not what mainstream history portrays. The Haitian Revolution (1791) was the catalyst for the movement toward the abolition of the slave trade. However, as Kamel notes, this history has often been

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discounted. He argues that it was the enslaved people themselves who initiated the struggle for liberation by taking up arms—yet the dominant narrative tends to emphasise the roles of British and French abolitionists. This serves as another example of how those who control the narrative can manipulate history to serve their interests.

The reclassifications of people into so-called tribes and minorities helped forge artificial distinctions and created new forms of inequality in regions that had previously coexisted—largely peacefully—through shared affinities. The resulting polemics served to deepen fractures, with those who aligned themselves with Western notions of progress and modernisation often amplified and supported through strategic funding by the West, as seen in the case of the Middle East, which Kamel examines in chapter six.

He takes the reader back to the roots of this confusion: the drawing of maps that established borders where none had previously existed. This process inadvertently led people to self-identify as minorities or majorities, igniting fractures that continue to shape conflict in the Middle East today. An example he offers is the creation of the State of Israel by the United Nations on Palestinian land.

In the seventh chapter, Kamel explores revolutions against global systems, tracing a series of protests and uprisings aimed at resisting Western expansionism—one critical example being the 1891 Tobacco Protest in Iran, where the roles of women and religious leaders were vital. The protest began when Nasir al-Din Shah granted English Major General F. Talbot a 50-year monopoly over the tobacco industry and gave German businessman Paul Reuter exclusive rights to extract Iran's coal, iron, copper, lead, and oil resources. These actions provoked widespread anger, pushing the local population to rebel against the Shah and, for the first time, triggering a broad-based movement of resistance.

The book concludes by examining one of the most pressing issues of our time: climate change. Even here, the unfairness is clear. Countries in the West—along with the US and Eastern China—are now among the largest contributors to global emissions, yet all other countries must bear the cost of their progress. Kamel describes climate change as one of the most obvious features of the Anthropocene.

Finally, Kamel returns one last time to the core of the book: advocating for genuine inclusiveness in how history is told—not merely a tokenistic engagement of non-Western historians to “spice up” conferences, meetings, or events, but a sincere effort to hear the other perspective: the history from below the global.

A book of this nature will, of course, be met with scrutiny, particularly by those who have long benefited from telling only one side of the story. Yet its arrival is both timely and necessary. The availability of a more complete historical account invites widespread engagement and demands to be shared. Like all rigorous research, it is open to contestation, which only strengthens its value and deepens the discussion. Its significance lies in offering a more balanced perspective, telling history from the other side and allowing the world to weigh the truth.

This work not only enhances our understanding of the past but also provides direction moving forward. Acknowledging these overlooked narratives, however uncomfortable that may be, calls for a more open, compassionate, and inclusive way of telling history. Most importantly, it serves as a call to action for emerging researchers: to be inspired by such scholarship and to take seriously the task of preserving and sharing the stories of their communities. After all, the power to tell our stories is in our hands, and how we use it shapes our combined futures.

Lorenzo Kamel's book takes us through an extensive sweep of history in such an informative and unique way that it offers the reader countless “aha” moments. It is a well-researched, comprehensive account that deserves wide recognition. This work gives voice to the untold stories of those long silenced, offering the other side of history we always sensed was there, but had never seen brought so vividly to life.

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