In yet another sickening display of ecocide and neocolonialism, an American dentist has set social media ablaze with his reprehensible killing for sport of Cecil, a majestic lion long since one of the major attractions in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe.

Condemnations have poured in from all corners of the globe as animal rights activists, environmental justice advocates, and people of conscience have publicly condemned Cecil’s killer, an dentist from Minnesota named Walter Palmer, for his despicable and illegal slaughter for sport of this powerful symbol of Zimbabwe, and the natural wonder of Africa. Palmer, a self-described “lover” of hunting, paid $55,000 to his local guides to aid in his killing of the beloved lion who lived on protected nature preserve land. Palmer has now become the target of an angry social media campaign that has gone mainstream as millions have directed their outrage at his disgusting act.

However, in the midst of this firestorm of anger, it seems no one has paused to consider the symbolic and historic significance of this heinous act. While condemning Palmer individually, no media outlets deem it worthy to consider the fact that Palmer’s crime is, in microcosm, an example of the sort of colonialist exploitation that the allegedly civilized West has perpetrated on Africa for more than five centuries. Indeed, the symbolic resonance of this episode goes far deeper than just the killing of a powerful emblem of Zimbabwe’s independence.

The Hidden Narrative

We’ve seen this story before. Money buys local help to aid in the rape of natural resources and land in order to provide the colonial exploiter with profit, and a feeling of pride and conquest. The colonialist, when exposed for his crimes, feigns ignorance and blames his local collaborators for the crime for which he himself is responsible. The colonialist uses extralegal means to perpetrate his plunder of nature, in this case utilizing dead meat in order to lure Cecil out of the wildlife preserve in order to kill him.

There is also a political significance to this incident. This was the ritualistic killing of a powerful symbol of one of the only truly independent states in Africa: Zimbabwe. Though it is demonized by the western corporate media Zimbabwe, and its leader Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party, have taken the courageous stand to indigenize the land and ownership of resources, stripping it from the white colonialists and their descendants and putting it into the hands of black Africans. Mugabe has rejected all collaboration with US military and corporations, and has in turn been vilified endlessly, pilloried as “Africa’s Hitler” and other such nonsense. So, the killing of Cecil is, in many ways, a symbolic strike at the very heart of Zimbabwe’s anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist politics.

Despite the propaganda about Zimbabwe, the truth about what has been done in that country cannot be suppressed, and it remains a sore spot for neoliberals and neocolonialists. In an important 2013 book entitled Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land, the authors explained how:
In the biggest land reform in Africa, 6,000 white farmers have been replaced by 245,000 Zimbabwean farmers. These are primarily ordinary poor people who have become more productive farmers. The change was inevitably disruptive at first, but production is increasing rapidly. Agricultural production is now returning to the 1990s level, and resettled farmers already grow 40% of the country’s tobacco and 49% of its maize.

This is a critical point to understand about Zimbabwe, and post-colonial Africa generally – African control over the land is one of the primary means by which African people achieve liberation, both economic and political. As if to underscore this point, ZANU-PF adopted as its slogan “Land is the economy and the economy is land.” In other words, the land is both economically vital, but also culturally and spiritually essential as it represents a rekindled connection to a pre-colonial past. And it is for this reason that an American marching into Zimbabwe to kill a beloved lion on protected land is far more than just an act of cruelty; it is an act of cultural war, whether he knew that or not.

It should also be pointed out that the hypocrisy of the western corporate media is on full display in the killing of Cecil. A single American illegally hunts and kills a lion in Africa, and the airwaves and internet are on fire with condemnations and calls for investigations and revenge. However, when an entire US and NATO military machine is mobilized to destroy a whole African country like Libya, and send it into a hellish cycle of violence and bloodshed, a living nightmare for its inhabitants, that is barely mentioned in any critical sense. Yes there was coverage of Obama, Cameron, and Sarkozy’s war on Libya, but it was mostly just the repetition of talking points from their respective governments and attendant NGOs.

There is also an implicit racism and white supremacy at work here. The lives of human beings don’t really matter so long as the illusion of “democracy” and “freedom” can be hung like bloody meat before the noses of ignorant news-consumers. White westerners don’t need to feel complicit in the heinous actions of a right wing dentist from Minnesota, while they should (but don’t) feel a sense of collective responsibility for the imperialist and criminal war on Libya. One allows critical distance, the other demands accountability.

Cecil’s killing also shows that, to the white westerner, everything in Africa is for sale, anything can be gotten...for the right price. It shows that, despite the triumphalism and self-congratulatory tone, the bourgeois liberal establishment continues to demonstrate time and time again that very little has, in fact, changed. And this is a painful realization for liberals believing in “progress.”

Ultimately, it shows that the mentality behind the rape and plunder of Africa is alive and well in our current, allegedly enlightened, postmodern society. But, far from that, the western world (America specifically), is as barbarous and rapacious as ever.

Don’t kid yourself, neocolonialism is alive and well. And we’ve just seen it in action.

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