# VI

# Decolonizing Ptolemaic Egypt

A decade ago, Edouard Will contributed to the volume of essays in honor of Chester Starr an important paper called "Pour une 'anthropologie coloniale' du monde hellénistique."[1] In this article Will urged historians of the Hellenistic world to adopt consciously the anthropological and sociological approaches to the modern colonial world that have developed particularly in the postwar era of decolonization. This idea was of course not wholly new, as Will himself pointed out. It can, for example, be seen in Jean Bingen's paper at the 1968 Congress of Papyrology in Ann Arbor, which I shall consider later; and it is clear that the relevance of the modern colonial experience to the Hellenistic world had struck Claire Préaux long before she wrote the striking passage quoted by Will from her magisterial work of synthesis published in 1978, *Le monde hellénistique*; speaking of scholarly generalizations about Greek economic rationalism versus Egyptian traditionalism, she noted that "There is, perhaps, in this generalization and in the pleasure of underlining the penetration of a superior technique into an indigenous milieu, an unconscious projection of the colonialism of the first half of our century."[2] Will's teaching, too, had already affected the late Claude Orrieux, who made use of colonial paradigms in his two books (to one of which, published in 1983, Will wrote the foreword) on Zenon, the estate manager

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1. In John W. Eadie and Josiah Ober, eds., *The Craft of the Ancient Historian* (Lanham, Md., 1985) 273–301.

2. *Le monde hellénistique* (Paris, 1978) I 380, cited by Will (above, n. 1) 281.

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in the Fayum who assembled the largest archival body of papyri to survive to the present.[3]

In reality, the act of modeling our approach to the Hellenistic world after the modern imperial and colonial experience is by itself in no way a novelty. Will was quite well aware of this fact. Much of the first half of his article is devoted to a description of what he sees as the intellectual limits of the classic works on the Hellenistic world by earlier historians, culminating in the pre-war work of Michael Rostovtzeff and Claire Préaux.[4] Will views these works as lacking in a clear approach to the sociological problems posed by the relations between colonizing and colonized. For this reason, he believes, the authors of these accounts were insufficiently interested in the agrarian world, too much interested in the state and its role, and too much devoted to the point of view of the dominating power, the Greek settlers and Macedonian rulers. This last defect was reinforced by the lack of any critical self-consciousness about European colonization and imperialism. Problems were framed in terms of hellenization, that is, of what might now be called the imposition of the culture of the rulers upon the ruled. In short, the problem Will describes was not so much one of ignorance of the colonial experience as an unthinking but positive outlook on the whole business from the point of view of a citizen of a colonizing power.

Will's point, therefore, is in part political: an appeal to change the point of view from which colonialism is seen. In the postwar world of decolonization, western scholars have no longer been able to look at a colonial world with the same "good conscience" they once had, confident that European domination was good for the ruled as well as for the rulers. Will argues that the new vistas opened up by this change of outlook, when coupled with a Marxist-influenced interest in the relations of production, make possible an entirely new approach to the society of the Hellenistic world. In this view, the analysis of states becomes of secondary interest, the relations of Greeks and non-Greeks of central importance. He thus asserts the necessity for a self-conscious, rather than unthinking, use of perspectives offered by the

3. *Les papyrus de Zénon: L'horizon d'un grec en Egypte au IIIe siècle avant J.C.* (Paris, 1983); *Zénon de Caunos, parépidémos, et le destin grec* (Paris, 1985). Orrieux's work is based in significant part on a confident distinction between papers concerning Zenon's employer Apollonios and those concerning Zenon's private affairs; this distinction has been demolished by G. F. Franko, *BASP* 25 (1988) 13–98. But much of what Orrieux discerns as a Greek colonial mentality remains intact. Although I shall not discuss these works in any detail in this paper, they have much to offer as examples of the value of Will's approach.

4. Particularly Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford, 1941) and Préaux's *L'économie royale des Lagides* (Brussels, 1939).

historian's contemporary world, and argues that the different approaches to the colonial world that have developed in an era of decolonization offer just the useful contemporary perspective needed. Now that Asia and Africa have been decolonized, in other words, it is time to decolonize Ptolemaic Egypt and its neighbors.

This raises the question whether a consciously anticolonialist or anti-imperialist political commitment is a prerequisite for pursuit of an inquiry of this sort. The fact that the discussion to date is almost exclusively francophone, specifically French and Belgian, and consciously leftward-leaning, might suggest an affirmative answer. Positive views about colonialism—nostalgia, even, as Edward Said would call it—are perhaps more vigorously alive in the Anglo-Saxon world than on the continent, although the descent of Algeria into chaos may well be changing this and reawakening French sentiment that letting that land go was a mistake.[5] But in a broader sense it would be as much an error to try to confine critical discussion of ancient colonialism to vehement critics of modern as to engage in any other essentialist exclusivism. I shall therefore proceed on the view that despite the political commitments underlying much of the modern scholarship that offers us models for exploration, those who do not fully share those commitments may still have an interest in testing the models to see if they are useful.

The avenue that Will describes for pursuing his goals is by definition an explicitly comparative one. If we define the Hellenistic world as colonial, then a wide range of colonial and post-colonial zones (in the latter Will includes South America) offer a range of "living societies accessible to more penetrating methods of investigation than the methods proper to the ancient world." Although Will recognizes that important differences must be taken account of, both among modern colonial worlds and ancient societies, he asserts that accepting the "colonial hypothesis" opens up such a large range of useful modern literature that we can renovate our entire approach to Hellenistic society.

On this basis, Will proceeds to offer three sets of observations. The first is a four-part typology of relations of colonized to colonizers. The second is a pair of important differences between antiquity and the recent past. The third is a pair of illustrative examples in which he believes that the use of comparative material helps to illuminate the situation in antiquity, in particular in Ptolemaic Egypt. I shall follow this outline, arguing first that the typology is inadequate and not very useful; that many more important

5. Part of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993) is devoted to criticism of various contemporary strands of thought less inclined to blame everything on the colonizing powers. Cf. esp. p. 21 on Salman Rushdie's criticism of nostalgia for the Raj.

differences need to be registered and absorbed; and that Will's two examples may teach a different lesson from the one he intended. I shall then proceed to suggest different ways of using the history and literature of colonialism to illuminate Ptolemaic Egypt and, potentially, other Hellenistic states. All of this is very tentative, partly because of the limited and unsystematic character of my own reading in this literature, but still more because of my sense that an approach through colonialism grasps only a fragment of the power relationships in question.[6]

## I. MODELS OF INTERACTION

The typology offered by Will, borrowed from an anthropologist of Africa, sees four main types of indigenous reaction to external domination: (1) active acceptance, most typical among notables intent on retaining power and among those looking to gain power, typically entailing a considerable measure of assimilation; (2) passive acceptance, usually by far the majority stance, natural among those already in a state of dependence and witnessing no major change in their status; (3) passive opposition, generated in many cases by a high level of anxiety over social and economic change, manifesting itself especially in withdrawal, strikes, and disappearance; and (4) active opposition, manifesting itself ultimately in revolt, whether spurred by political, economic, or cultural factors. Will notes that these stages are not necessarily a logical or chronological progression, that they are a theoretical typology that may well vary from time to time and place to place, and that each group can develop internal fissures under various pressures; he cites particularly the tendency of victorious revolutions to fissure between those more ready to adopt the techniques of the foreign dominators and those intent on purifying their culture from such foreign attributes.

Ancient historians cannot simply borrow anthropological theory and schemes without criticism. Anthropology is no more monolithic than any other discipline in its analytic frameworks and broad views. The four-part scheme deployed by Will seems to me even more inadequate than he would admit, not simply because it is not complex enough, but because its underlying binary opposition between acceptance and rejection is not very helpful, tending to frame reaction to foreign domination in the outsider's terms. From the point of view of the indigenous population, acceptance and rejection may not be the real choices; even some types of rejection may be types of acceptance. Within resistance and even rebellion, there may

6. For a more developed version of this discussion see my *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History* (London, 1995).

be many modes of dealing with the imprint of the colonizing culture on the colonized.[7] To quote John and Jean Comaroff, "When the colonized respond in the genre of rational debate—at least as defined in European terms—the hegemony of the colonizing culture may be well on the way to instilling itself in its new subjects; that is why truly counter-hegemonic reactions so frequently seek out alternative modes of expression."[8]

Equally, what Will's model would term passive acceptance may often disguise subtler forms of passive rejection.[9] That these may not be understood as resistance by the colonizer and are often characterized as "laziness,"[10] flight, theft, sabotage and the like only underscores their value. Nor are they distinctive to colonial settings. In sum, the twin polarities of this model, although not without value as a starting point, appear to me eventually only to impose an artificial spatial organization on the range of indigenous responses. It may not even be excessive to describe the model as being itself a typical product of European attempts to exercise intellectual control over the colonial situation.

## II. CRITICAL DIFFERENCES

The first of the two key differences Will sees is that the conquest of the East by Alexander and his successors was essentially military and political in character and origin, whereas modern colonization was heavily driven by economic interest, that is, by either access to resources or the development of trading networks. This distinction is broadly characteristic of the difference between ancient Greek culture and modern capitalist civilization, in Will's view. It might be more realistic to describe the economic aims and results of Alexander and his companions as being the transfer of accumulated wealth by the distribution of war booty,[11] that of the European powers as modern capitalism. Alexander's successors, however, the early Hellenistic kings,

7. Cf. E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 214.

8. J. and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, Colorado, 1992) 257.

9. See the discussion of peasant reactions in James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985), from which it is clear that much of what is classified by the typology Will invokes as "passive acceptance" is actually a form of resistance. That these are described by Scott as specimens of "class struggle" (xvi, 289–303) rather than of resistance to colonialism is immaterial here, but it raises other issues discussed later in this paper.

10. Cf. E. Said 203, with references.

11. On which one may see the memorable pages of Cl. Préaux, *Monde hellénistique* I 295–98.

sought through systematic economic exploitation of their holdings to provide the resources for their political aspirations, and it is not obvious that in the end this came down to as profound a difference between ancient and modern as Will would hold.

The second distinction is that almost all modern colonialism was accompanied by, and sometimes largely executed by, a religious missionary movement, propagating a universalizing monotheistic religion; by contrast, both conquerors and conquered in the Hellenistic world were polytheists, open to the cults of others and not particularly intent on imposing their own on anyone.

This list needs expansion, and I believe that the two additions I shall offer—and to which more could certainly be added—are no less fundamental than the two points Will makes. First, modern imperialism and colonialism have been characterized by systematic racism. The indigenous populations of the colonized countries were generally viewed not only as inferior and backward—and therefore proper receptacles for the bounty of the western civilizing mission—but as ineradicably inferior, incapable ever of rising to the level of the colonizers.[12] Certainly the Greeks—like other ancient peoples—habitually regarded themselves as superior to others, and even described them at times as slaves by nature.[13] But even so they lacked systematic racism, particularly one based on skin color, and their attitudes toward "barbarians" were by no means entirely negative.[14] Indeed, the ancient experience of the continuity of the color spectrum in the Mediterranean and the proximity of a wide variety of hues bears no resemblance to the modern encounter of northern Europeans with distant peoples of radically different color. The Greeks also had a high regard for some of the ancient civilizations of the Near East, especially that of Egypt, and their relationship to that country was thus naturally schizophrenic. Moreover, it was routinely possible for an Egyptian in Ptolemaic Egypt, by education, employment and status, to become an official "Hellene," a development largely (although not wholly) alien to modern colonial practice and ideology.[15]

12. Cf., e.g., Said 101–102; 228 ("Irish people can never be English any more than Cambodians or Algerians can be French").

13. See, e.g., Yvon Garlan, *Slavery in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, 1988) 120–26, who describes the development of this ideology along with contrary views.

14. On the lack of racial prejudice based on color, see F. M. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983) 63–108. For an example of the complex range of views, some admiring, displayed by the Greeks toward barbarians, see S. W. Hirsch, *The Friendship of the Barbarians: Xenophon and the Persian Empire* (Hanover, 1985).

15. Such official hellenization was, I think, much farther-reaching than for example acquisition of non-native status in Dutch Indonesia. For the process by which individuals

Secondly, modern colonialism is virtually defined by the existence of a metropolitan center outside the colonized land, to which the wealth extracted from the colony flows and where ultimate power resides.[16] For the Hellenistic kingdoms, there was no such metropolitan center. One may legitimately think of the assemblage of kingdoms as a kind of continuing Macedonian empire, but that is true only in the sense that the United States continued after 1783 to be a kind of continuing British empire. Nor can one elude this difficulty by claiming that Alexandria was such a metropolitan center. In reality, Egypt's metropolis was tightly woven into the economic and political fabric of the country on whose ground it stood. It cannot be taken for an equivalent to Paris, London, or Brussels. Particularly in the conditions of travel and communication prevalent until the late nineteenth century, distance is not a negligible aspect. Anyone who doubts its impact would be well advised to ponder the alienating and terrifying impact of the distance between Indonesia and the Netherlands with its court system that dominates the concluding sections of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This Earth of Mankind*, a book to which I shall return later. I do not mean to minimize the extractive force of the Ptolemaic government with respect to Egypt and its other possessions. But it is impossible to imagine a Ptolemaic official describing Egypt in the terms John Stuart Mill uses: "Our West Indian colonies, for example, cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of their own ... [but are rather] the place where England finds it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee, and a few other tropical commodities."[17] It was Rome, not the Ptolemies, that to some extent treated Egypt in this manner.

A still broader concern about colonialism needs to be raised at this point. This is, simply, that categorization, however useful, has sharp limits. This is true of the modern comparanda; "colonial" is, though a useful category, one that covers a wide variety of circumstances. Like the Greek-centered approaches that Will deplores, it is itself a categorization constructed from the point of view of the colonizer. It tends to obfuscate the enormous differences in social, political, and economic organization of the societies

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came to hold status and names dependent on their official posts, see Willy Clarysse, "Greeks and Egyptians in the Ptolemaic Army and Administration," *Aegyptus* 65 (1985) 57–66 and "Some Greeks in Egypt," in J. H. Johnson, ed., *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and Beyond* (*SAOC* 51, Chicago, 1992) 51–56.

16. It is true that Said (63) tries to use colonialism as a description of the treatment of the indigenous population of North America by the European settlers as they expanded across the continent even after American independence, but this seems to me to be stretching a concept for the sake of a political point.

17. *Principles of Political Economy* III (Toronto, 1965) 693, quoted by Said 59.

visited with outside domination. This problem has long been recognized and discussed, but with no agreed-upon results. Moses Finley proposed three essential requirements for the use of the term "colony": significant emigration, continuing dependency on the colonizing country, and expropriation and settlement of land.[18] He excluded the Hellenistic kingdoms from his definition, above all because they failed to meet the second of these conditions, as we have already noted.

The straightforward description of Ptolemaic Egypt as a colony thus encounters some significant structural difficulties. But this does not justify our discarding colonialism altogether as an approach to the Hellenistic world or to antiquity in general. One finds just such a rejection in a recent work of Edward Said:[19] "But modern European imperialism was a constitutively, radically different type of overseas domination from all earlier forms. Scale and scope were only part of the difference, though certainly not Byzantium, or Rome, or Athens, or Baghdad, or Spain and Portugal during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries controlled anything like the size of the territories controlled by Britain and France in the nineteenth century. The more important differences are first the sustained longevity of the disparity in power, and second, the massive organization of the power, which affected the details and not just the large outlines of life." The logical conclusion of this statement might well be that using "colonial" as a category is a blunder caused by failure to appreciate the great differences between ancient and modern imperialisms.[20]

This argument will not do. For one thing, Said's claims about scale are both wrong and irrelevant. The Persian empire, for example, was at least as large as any modern colonial empire except perhaps the British, and in any case Said's own argument implicates the Belgians and Dutch just as much as the British and French. So scale is a red herring. Said is equally wrong about longevity; the Ptolemaic kingdom lasted as long as the British empire or the Dutch, and the Roman empire—and, even more strikingly, the Byzantine—lasted still longer. The main period of European colonialism, when it reached such a large scale, was actually just a little over a century in duration, from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth.

18. "Colonies—An Attempt at a Typology," *TransRoyHistSoc* 5 ser. 26 (1976) 167–88; I owe the reference to the editors of this volume.

19. *Culture and Imperialism* 221.

20. There is another categorical problem that I cannot discuss here, the tendency to blur imperialism and colonialism, or even (in Said's case) to confound imperialism and all projections of national power. For present purposes, I take colonialism to be distinguished from imperialism above all by the settlement of significant numbers of members of the imperial power in the conquered territory.

Said's argument thus reduces itself to the question of the "massive organization of power." I am inclined to think that many "details" of life in Egypt were affected by foreign domination and settlement, and that this was true in other Hellenistic kingdoms as well, where the planting of Greek cities on the landscape certainly reorganized the control of land and other productive resources as much as the Ptolemaic management of Egypt. In any event, such questions need examination on a scale appropriate to the level of detail meant, and any *a priori* exclusion of the colonial model from discussion of the ancient world will only prevent such examination. But all of the reservations offered here suggest at least that focusing on colonialism per se may be less rewarding than thinking about colonialism in conjunction with the larger phenomenon of imperialism and hierarchical systems in general.

## III. TWO CASE STUDIES

We come now to Will's two case studies. The first is the use of petitions addressed to the king in Ptolemaic Egypt. Will wonders if they ever reached their destination and had any outcome. He brings to bear, by way of comparison, the operation of a Peruvian system of petitions to high officials, in which the petitions generally went nowhere, being perpetually described by bureaucrats as in the course of transmission. During these long silences the petitioners became effective dependents of the bureaucratic office, but acquired in this way the ability to say to others that their case was under official scrutiny. Did the Ptolemaic system work this way, he wonders?

The second is the impact of the introduction of coinage in a society not accustomed to it, and particularly its use as a medium for payment of obligations to the government. He points out that Peruvians were driven to accept wage labor, especially in mines, in order to earn enough currency to pay the money taxes imposed by the government.[21] Moreover, the actions of the foreign government and settlers tended to turn money into the single standard of wealth, in contrast to traditional local ways of measuring it; this process was ultimately destructive to the local economy.[22] Did the same thing happen in Egypt?

It is by no means clear that either of these questions would, if pursued in detail, lead to the conclusion that Ptolemaic Egypt did, in fact, show the

21. A striking parallel exists in the development of wage labor in South Africa, also to meet tax burdens: see J. and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination,* 162–63 etc.

22. Again well paralleled in South Africa, cf. J. and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination,* 128 etc.

same phenomena as colonial or post-colonial Peru (or South Africa, for that matter). Ptolemaic petitions normally do not have a date of submission, but the surviving ones very commonly have an official subscription giving instructions for the handling of the case—which does have a date. We cannot, therefore, measure the time elapsed between complaint and action.[23] We do, on the other hand, know that at least some petitions received official response, although it is likely enough that the surviving petitions come mainly from recycled official archives composed precisely of petitions that had been dealt with. It would not do for us to assume that the Ptolemaic administration was entirely honest and efficient, but neither do the actual documents give any warrant for a precise comparison to the Peruvian situation Will invokes.[24]

As to money, the Egyptians were very well acquainted with silver, even if largely uncoined, as a standard of value before the Ptolemies. And Ptolemaic taxation in money was relatively light, achieving a symbolic value as much as anything; the bulk of the taxes continued to be collected in kind. It is therefore by no means clear that the Ptolemies created the kind of pressures for their subjects supposed by Will's parallels. It may be argued, indeed, that the Egyptian economy before Alexander's conquest was less isolated and "primitive" than has often been supposed.[25] This is not to deny all impact, only to argue that the parallelism between the Egyptian economy before the Macedonians and the Peruvian before the Spaniards may not be very strong.

Even this brief analysis is sufficient to show that the parallels may actually produce very misleading views. One may reply, as I think Will certainly would, that the value of the parallels is in formulating questions, not in providing their answers. That is part of the truth. But there is another answer, which seems to me more interesting and more characteristic of comparative studies generally. We agree that the parallels allow the formulation of hypotheses about how certain aspects of Egyptian society in the Hellenistic period might have functioned. Let us suppose that these hypotheses can be not merely called into doubt (as I have tried to do briefly above) but definitely refuted. The value of the negative results is not only that we learn some particular (negative) characteristic of ancient society; it is also that the

23. Some evidence from the Roman period seems to me to indicate reasonably quick turnaround time, much faster than modern courts offer; cf. R. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993) 169–70.

24. That is not to say that some elements may not have been comparable: the basic psychological importance of submitting appeals against perceived injustice regardless of the likelihood of direct redress, say.

25. This argument was made in a paper on "Money and Coinage in Ptolemaic Egypt" by Sitta von Reden at the XXIst International Congress of Papyrologists, Berlin, August 1995.

reasoning leading to the hypothesis can now be unpacked and examined. What fundamental or contingent characteristics of the ancient world, and of the particular society in it that we are studying, underlie and produce this interesting difference between Egypt and Peru?[26]

## IV. APPLYING WILL'S APPROACH

The most extensive and explicit response to Will's article known to me is a trio of long articles—together, a small book—by Barbara Anagnostou-Canas, who acknowledges assistance from Orrieux. The first article is on the military apparatus used by the Ptolemies to control Egypt, the second on the native rebellions against Ptolemaic rule, and the third on the control of land.[27] With specific reference to the article in the Starr Festschrift, Canas accepts the hypothesis of Ptolemaic Egypt as a colonial society and proceeds to apply this view to these two aspects. These are careful, detailed studies, with exhaustive references to the literary and documentary sources and modern bibliography. Their method, however, is essentially that of all preceding studies on the same subjects: the sources are collected and analyzed, then conclusions are given. The conclusions are framed in the language of colonialism, both with a few comparative remarks and with judgmental tones, already visible in the programmatic statement at the outset of the military article: "It is a matter of studying the negative part of the occupation of Egypt by the Greeks for three centuries."[28] What Canas does not do is what Will is actually suggesting, to create a model from the comparative evidence and test the Ptolemaic material against it. To my mind, therefore, these articles are, despite their claims, only a partial attempt to put Will's precepts into practice.

It is perhaps then unsurprising that the results of these articles are not particularly novel. The Ptolemies controlled Egypt in the first place by their military presence, consisting of military settlers on the land, garrisons in key places, and requisitioning of housing from the indigenous population for the

26. It is, to be sure, true that such differences themselves are interesting in large part because they coexist with important similarities, as Josiah Ober points out to me.

27. "Rapports de dépendance coloniale dans l'Égypte ptolémaïque I: L'appareil militaire," *BIDR* 3 ser. 31–32 (1989/90) 151–236; "Rapports de dépendance coloniale dans l'Égypte ptolémaïque II: Les rebelles de la chôra," *Proceedings of the XIXth International Congress of Papyrology* (Cairo, 1992) II 323–72; "La colonisation du sol dans l'Égypte ptolémaïque," *Grund und Boden in Altägypten (Rechtliche und sozio-ökonomische Verhältnisse). Akten des internationalen Symposions Tübingen 18–20 Juni 1990*, S. Allam, ed. (Tübingen, 1994) 355–74. These are cited below as "Canas I," "Canas II" and "Canas III."

28. Canas I, 156.

troops. Greeks took over much of the better land. There was for a long time no actual use of force, merely its presence and threat, and the Ptolemaic regime can be described as *douce* rather than *dure*.[29] But it was all the same a regime in which force was the ultimate guarantor of foreign domination, and actual force had to be used to repress various rebellions. A key element in military control of Egypt after the late third century was the use of Egyptians enrolled in the army to keep their own fellow-countrymen in subjection. The rebellions, in Canas' view, were essentially nationalist uprisings produced by the intense economic pressure put on the population by the Ptolemaic extractive system. They ultimately failed in part precisely because of the collaboration of many Egyptians with the foreign regime, involving both the official support of the priesthoods and the presence of Egyptian troops in the royal armies.[30] Most of the more controversial elements of this description have been the key objects of scholarly argument for more than a half century between those who have seen the revolutions as nationalistic—thus primarily directed against colonial rule—and those who have viewed them primarily as fueled by economic considerations and local separatism.[31] Canas does not demonstrate a link between the supposed economic oppression (itself not demonstrated, for that matter) and the revolts, but simply asserts it.[32] She may be right or wrong in her views, but I would set out to support or counter them with much the same traditional tools she uses.[33] The references to colonialism serve mainly as decoration and flavoring, rather than occupying any structural role in the argument. I do not think they are inappropriate or even wrong, and in some cases the point seems well made that indeed Ptolemaic Egypt had some clear resemblances to later colonial societies.[34] But that is something different from using a colonial anthropology to generate fertile hypotheses about the Hellenistic world.

29. In particular, Canas (I 165 etc.) is clear about the absence of juridical discrimination; she seems unaware, however, that the Greeks were exempted from some taxes the Egyptians paid (I 166).

30. Canas II 371.

31. Canas II, 323–25 gives a good summary with bibliography.

32. See, e.g., Canas II 334, 361.

33. Most particularly, Canas tends to take all statements, whether in documents or in polemical literature, at face value, without any attempt to look at propagandistic motives. And (Canas II 340) she shows no awareness of the persistence of local separatism in Egyptian politics through more than two millennia of pre-Ptolemaic history.

34. Canas III seems to me the weakest of the group in this regard, for what it shows is the close resemblance of the Ptolemaic land regime to the situation in Pharaonic times, with little more than a change of favored elites. It seems stretching the definition of colonialism to see it in such arrangements.

## V. LOOKING FOR VALUE

If Will's two cases give us only negative results, and Canas' application does not show much added value, we may naturally ask if other approaches and cases can give more positive outcomes. To this question I believe the answer is yes. At the papyrological congress of 1968, as I have already mentioned, Jean Bingen presented some reflections on a complex and difficult document from the Zenon archive.[35] Zenon, the estate agent in the Fayum for the finance minister Apollonios, had rented out a substantial parcel of grainland to a group of Egyptian farmers, who were to pay their landlord one third of the eventual crop. The practice of sharecropping was well known in Egypt and readily understood by the farmers. While the wheat crop was still standing, orders came from Apollonios that the amount of the farmers' payment to him should be established on the basis of an estimation in advance, rather than after the harvest. The precise meaning of this step within this particular context is unclear, but at a minimum it would be analogous to other Ptolemaic measures to provide the government (in this case, of course, the private landlord) with stable and predictable revenues, thus placing potential risks and rewards of fluctuation in crop size (and perhaps value) on others. Such techniques, including estimation of standing crops, were well-known parts of Greek economic management, but entirely foreign to the Egyptians.

The result of the attempt by Panakestor to put Apollonios' order into effect was that the farmers first replied that they would think about it and answer later. That answer, given a few days later, was to retreat into a temple and refuse to take part in the exercise, preferring to abandon the entire arrangement rather than be party to the process of estimation. Bingen points out that "flight is a characteristic reaction of an archaic group, in the ethnographic sense of that word, in the face of the intrusion of a more evolved group, and particularly before the intrusion of a group which, being aware of the innovative efficacy of human intervention, disturbs the existing interdependent order." Third-century Egypt, of course, is not a prehistoric peasant culture, nor was the third-century Greek world a modern capitalistic society. But the mechanism of behavior is essentially the same, the simple refusal even to discuss matters, the refusal to play the outsiders' game. Bingen points out that the fact that the peasants flee to the temple rather than simply taking to flight is a measure of the difference between the institutionally well-developed character of Egyptian society and the

35. J. Bingen, "Grecs et Égyptiens d'après PSI 502," *Proceedings of the XIIth International Congress of Papyrology* (Toronto, 1970) 35–40.

less institutionalized societies involved in many colonial confrontations of this sort.

The farmers' behavior could be seen as a type of Will's "passive rejection" reaction, the use of withdrawal and strikes; but actually the situation is more complicated. The farmers are very willing to enter into contractual relationships with the outsiders, to help them in the enterprise of agricultural development of new land. But they are willing to do it only in their own way, not with the outsiders' new management techniques. It is certainly possible that Apollonios' attempt to impose advance estimation at this late stage in the agricultural cycle was not a neutral and innocent act, any more than the forced imposition of fixed cash rents payable in advance has been a neutral act in the Green Revolution that transformed agriculture in Malaysia and elsewhere in the third world;[36] the farmers may have been right to see it as a trap they had to avoid. In any case, these farmers are neither simply accepting nor simply rejecting foreign domination; these just are not the categories that appear as choices in their particular situation.

In this case, then, not only the similarities of the Egyptian situation to that seen elsewhere but also its differences are illuminated by the comparison. Bingen's paper was written for oral presentation (within a time limit) and is interpretive rather than heavily documented. The ethnographic parallels are barely supported by bibliographic citation, let alone explored in detail; in fact, his reference was to a generalizing description in a theoretical work, not to a specific instance in a particular society. Nor are we dealing with hypotheses from anthropology, sociology, or modern history tested against the papyri. But this case shows that progress in interpreting the documents can come from an imagination informed by knowledge of the colonial world.

It seems to me that it is precisely the informing of the imagination that is at the heart of the gains realizable from this sort of comparative study. The surviving documents, after all, record only some aspects of life, leaving others either barely mentioned, at least in any explicit fashion, or entirely absent. If we know what we are looking for, we can sometimes find indirect traces of it in documentation created for some entirely different purpose, and to know what we are looking for we are dependent on the enrichment of our imagination about human experience. The imaginative literature growing out of the colonial experience thus seems to me at least as likely as works of social science about that experience to help us grasp elements of life that we otherwise would miss, and I shall offer one example. This is

36. See J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (above, n. 9) 72–74.

the group of four novels by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, beginning with *This Earth of Mankind*, which I mentioned earlier.[37]

The narrator of the quartet is a Native Javanese student—the only student of his race, in fact—at the Dutch High School in the Javan port of Surabaya. Eighteen years old when the story begins, in 1898, he is the son of a provincial official in Dutch service and a descendant of Java's old nobility. There are many elements of the society he moves in and depicts that are grossly dissimilar to that of Ptolemaic Egypt, among them the great importance of race and caste in official stratification, the Dutch attempt to restrict Javanese learning of Dutch, and the dominance of economic activities aimed at producing a large economic surplus for the home country, which did indeed become very rich over the centuries in large part as a result of this colonial empire. And Java was only one island in what is now Indonesia, and Javanese (itself a complex language with multiple registers of speech) was only one of the native languages of the region.

All the same, there are elements of the situation that bear marked resemblances to what we know of Ptolemaic society. The impingement of foreign ideas about economic development and entrepreneurship onto the traditional economy of the island plays a large role, and the intertwining of colonizers seeking riches with the native population that lived with them and actually did the work is a central theme. The complicity of native elites[38] in the colonial management of the country is depicted in varied detail, including the natives' tendency to view the oppressors' culture as superior to their own, but at the same time their ability to use the colonizers' language as a tool for resistance. Intra-family disputes over acculturation to foreign ways are very noticeable. Patterns of language use are complex and reflect both power relationships and ethnic diversity; Java was even more linguistically diverse than Egypt, where Aramaic must have been commonly spoken in some centers alongside Egyptian and Greek.

What I find most striking here is not the structural similarities, however, but Toer's ability to give voice to the way in which these were *experienced* by the people affected, above all by liminal figures like the narrator, whose Netherlandization in culture is much resented by his family, even though

37. 1975; trans. Max Lane, New York, 1990. The second novel is *Child of All Nations* (1980; trans. Max Lane, New York, 1991), the third *Footsteps* (1985; trans. Max Lane, New York, 1994), the fourth *House of Glass* (1988; trans. Max Lane, New York, 1996). *Child of All Nations* has a striking instance in its final chapter of language as a mode of resistance to colonial exploitation.

38. It may be significant that these Javanese elites descended from a local ruling class with a history of local imperialism of their own, rather like the Egyptians. (I owe this point to a member of my audience at Princeton.)

they have pushed him into the educational track that has produced it, and who suffers monstrous and crushing blows from the injustices perpetrated by the Dutch legal system, operating across thousands of miles of ocean and in callous disregard of the realities of Javanese life. One does not need to suppose that the Ptolemaic system was as brutal as the Dutch—I do not think it was, in fact—to recognize the narrator's usefulness to us as a reminder of the subjective and internal side of what we see in the documents only from the outside.

One example will have to suffice; it comes from the second novel, *Child of All Nations*, and I have chosen it for its point of contact with Bingen's article. The narrator, Minke, visits a rural village dominated by a sugar factory. The factory has put heavy pressure on local small landowners to rent out to it, for cash, a large portion of their fields, which are to be planted in cane rather than in the rice a farmer would plant for himself. From a European point of view, tracts of land traditionally used for subsistence farming are being converted to the more profitable production of a cash crop for an international market. Zenon would surely feel at home, and no doubt the correspondence of the mill would, like his records, show an essentially orderly process with only minor difficulties. The farmer interviewed by Minke, however, puts it this way: "I don't want to rent out my land but every day I'm threatened, taunted, insulted. Now they threaten that the lane to my house will be closed off. If you want to get to your house and land, they say, you'll have to fly. They have already closed the channels bringing water to my paddy fields. I couldn't farm the paddy, so I had to rent it out."[39] It is clear that it is not only the inadequacy of the payment, or the fact that only about two-thirds of what is contracted for is really paid, that creates the peasant's resistance (for in this case it does turn into armed resistance). Rather, it is the disrespectful treatment and the informal use of coercion, such as cutting off the water supply, both by the Europeans and by the natives in the employ of the Europeans. Egypt, especially the Fayum, would have offered excellent opportunities for precisely such behavior. I am persuaded that an attentive rereading of the papyri with an imagination sensitized by works such as Toer's has a great potential to alert scholars to disguised realities of this colonial society, even where those may turn out to be very different from the systematic brutality of European imperialism a century ago.

This approach, finally, has the additional value of avoiding a sterile confrontation between the merits of drawing models from the colonial experience and those of looking to other types of power relationships and social structures to inform us. Many of the phenomena described in studies

39. *Child of All Nations* 165.

of colonialism are not unique to the colonial milieu, but may legitimately be seen as products of hierarchy and unequal power, both economic and political. They are thus found in societies that cannot reasonably be called colonial and in those whose colonial phase is in the past. The description of peasant everyday resistance tactics to which I alluded earlier comes from a book by James Scott about a Malaysian village experiencing the Green Revolution. This setting is in no way specifically colonial; indeed it concerns the internal workings of a purely Malay society in the 1970s. The author analyzes his findings entirely in terms of class conflict, in a Marxist sense. Now this book is rich in material that I find highly suggestive for the analysis of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. It would not be difficult to offer parallels to many aspects of it from colonial regimes. In part this is the result of documentation. Many of the traditional and hierarchical societies for which we have the most information are the colonial states of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, because Europeans used the technology of writing to record their dealings with their subjects in enormous detail—just as did the Ptolemies.

It follows, then, that those power relationships that are distinctive to colonialism are only a subset of those that can help us understand the societies of the Hellenistic world. Much can be learned elsewhere as well, and we need not assert that the specifically colonial elements of the situation are more or less important to our understanding than those aspects of power relations that are not distinctive to the colonial setting. Both can inform our imaginations, and both deserve the most rigorous testing against the uneven but abundant documentation left us by the people of Ptolemaic Egypt, sifted through the mesh of destruction by climate, insects, and humans.