

HOW TO READ **DONALD DUCK** IMPERIALIST IDEOLOGY IN THE DISNEY COMIC



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III. FROM THE NOBLE SAVAGE TO THE THIRD WORLD

Donald (talking to a witch doctor in Africa):
"I see you're an up to date nation!
Have you got telephones?"

Witch doctor: "Have we gottee telephones!
... All colors, all shapes ... only
trouble is only *one* has wires. It's a
hot line to the world loan bank."

(TR 106, US 9/64)

Where is Aztecland? Where is Inca-Blinca?
Where is Unsteadystan?

There can be no doubt that Aztecland is Mexico, embracing as it does all the prototypes of the picture-postcard Mexico: mules, siestas, volcanoes, cactuses, huge sombreros, ponchos, serenades, machismo, and Indians from ancient civilizations. The country is defined primarily in terms of this grotesque folklorism. Petrified in an archetypal embryo, exploited for all the superficial and stereotyped prejudices which surround it, "Aztecland," under its pseudo-imaginary name becomes that much easier to Disnify. This is Mexico recognizable by its commonplace exotic identity labels, not the real Mexico with all its problems.

Walt took virgin territories of the U.S. and built upon them his Disneyland palaces, his magic kingdoms. His view of the world at large is

framed by the same perspective; it is a world already colonized, with phantom inhabitants who have to conform to Disney's notions of it. Each foreign country is used as a kind of model within the process of invasion by Disney-nature. And even if some foreign country like Cuba or Vietnam should dare to enter into open conflict with the United States, the Disney Comics brand-mark is immediately stamped upon it, in order to make the revolutionary struggle appear banal. While the Marines make revolutionaries run the gauntlet of bullets, Disney makes them run a gauntlet of magazines. There are two forms of killing: by machine guns and saccharine.

Disney did not, of course, invent the inhabitants of these lands; he merely forced them into the proper mold. Casting them as stars in his hit-parade, he made them into decals and puppets for his fantasy palaces, good and in-offensive savages unto eternity.

According to Disney, underdeveloped peoples are like children, to be treated as such, and if they don't accept this definition of themselves, they should have their pants taken down and be given a good spanking. That'll teach them! When something is *said* about the child/noble savage, it is really the Third World one is *thinking* about. The hegemony which we have detected between



the child-adults who arrive with their civilization and technology, and the child-noble savages who accept this alien authority and surrender their riches, stands revealed as an exact replica of the relations between metropolis and satellite, between empire and colony, between master and slave. Thus we find the metropolitans not only searching for treasures, but also selling the native *comics* (like those of Disney), to teach them the role assigned to them by the dominant urban press. Under the suggestive title "Better Guile Than Force," Donald departs for a Pacific atoll in order to try to survive for a month, and returns loaded with dollars, like a modern business tycoon. The entrepreneur can do better than the missionary or the army. The world of the Disney comic is self-publicizing, ensuring a process of enthusiastic buying and selling even within its very pages.

Enough of generalities. Examples and proofs. Among all the child-noble savages, none is more exaggerated in his infantilism than Gu, the Abominable Snow Man (TR 113, US 6-8/56, "The Lost Crown of Genghis Khan"): a brainless, feeble-minded Mongolian type (living by a strange coincidence, in the Himalayan Hindu Kush mountains among yellow peoples). He is treated like a child. He is an "*abominable* housekeeper," living in a messy cave, "the worst of taste," littered with "cheap trinkets and waste." Hats etc., lying around which he has no use for. Vulgar, uncivilized, he speaks in a babble of inarticulate baby-noises: "Gu." But he is also witless, having stolen the golden jewelled crown of Genghis Khan (which belongs to Scrooge by virtue of certain secret operations of his agents), without having any idea of its value. He has tossed the crown in



a corner like a coal bucket, and prefers Uncle Scrooge's watch: value, one dollar ("It is his favorite *toy*"). Never mind, for "his stupidity makes it easy for us to get away!" Uncle Scrooge does indeed manage, magically, to exchange the cheap artifact of civilization which goes tick-tock, for the crown. Obstacles are overcome once Gu (innocent child-monstruous animal — underdeveloped Third Worldling) realizes that they only want to take something that is of no use to him, and that in exchange he will be given a fantastic and mysterious piece of technology (a watch) which he can use as a plaything. What is extracted is gold, a raw material; he who surrenders it is mentally underdeveloped and physically overdeveloped. The gigantic physique of Gu, and of all the other marginal savages, is the model of a physical strength suited only for physical labor.*

Such an episode reflects the barter relationship established with the natives by the first conquistadors and colonizers (in Africa, Asia, America and Oceania): some trinket, the product of technological superiority (European or North American) is exchanged for gold (spices, ivory, tea, etc.). The native is relieved of something he would never have thought of using for himself or as a means of exchange. This is an extreme and almost anecdotic example. The common stuff of other types of comic book (e.g. in the internationally famous *Tintin in Tibet* by the Belgian Hergé) leaves the abominable creature in his bestial condition, and thus unable to enter into any kind of economy.

But this particular victim of infantile regression stands at the borderline of Disney's noble savage cliché. Beyond it lies the foetus-savage, which for reasons of sexual prudery Disney cannot use.

*For the theme of physical superdevelopment with the connotation of sexual threat, see Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 1968.

Lest the reader feel that we are spinning too fine a thread in establishing a parallel between someone who carries off gold in exchange for a mechanical trinket, and imperialism extracting raw material from a mono-productive country, or between typical dominators and dominated, let us now adduce a more explicit example of Disney's strategy in respect to the countries he caricatures as "backward" (needless to say, he never hints at the causes of their backwardness).

The following dialogue (taken from the same comic which provided the quotation at the beginning of this chapter) is a typical example of Disney's colonial attitudes, in this case directed against the African independence movements. Donald has parachuted into a country in the African jungle. "Where am I," he cries. A witch doctor (with spectacles perched over his gigantic primitive mask) replies: "In the new nation of Kooko Coco, fly boy. This is our capital city." It consists of three straw huts and some moving haystacks. When Donald enquires after this strange phenomenon, the witch doctor explains: "Wigs! This be hairy idea our ambassador bring back from United Nations." When a pig pursuing Donald lands and has the wigs removed disclosing the whereabouts of the enemy ducks, the

following dialogue ensues:

Pig: "Hear ye! hear ye! I'll pay you kooks some hairy prices for your wigs! Sell me all you have!"

Native: "Whee! Rich trader buyee our old head hangers!"

Another native: "He payee me six trading stamps for my beehive hairdo!"

Third native (overjoyed): "He payee me two Chicago streetcar tokens for my Beatle job."

To effect his escape, the pig decides to scatter a few coins as a decoy. The natives are happy to stop, crouch and cravenly gather up the money. Elsewhere, when the Beagle Boys dress up as Polynesian natives to deceive Donald, they mimic the same kind of behavior: "You save our lives . . . We be your servants for ever." And as they prostrate themselves, Donald observes: "They are natives too. But a little more civilized."

Another example (Special Number D 423): Donald leaves for "Outer Congolia," because Scrooge's business there has been doing badly. The reason is that "the King ordered his subjects not to give Christmas presents this year. He wants everyone to hand over this money to him." Donald comments: "What selfishness!" And so to work. Donald makes himself king,



being taken for a great magician who flies through the skies. The old monarch is dethroned because "he is not a wise man like you [Donald]. He does not permit us to buy presents." Donald accepts the crown, intending to decamp as soon as the stock is sold out: "My first command as king is . . . buy presents for your families and don't give your king a cent!" The old king had wanted the money to leave the country and eat what he fancied, instead of the fish heads which were traditionally his sole diet. Repentant, he promises that given another chance, he will govern better, "and I will find a way somehow to avoid eating that ghastly stew."

Donald (to the people): "And I assure you that I leave the throne in good hands. Your old king is a good king . . . and wiser than before." The people: "Hurray! Long Live the King!"

The king has learned that he must ally himself with foreigners if he wishes to stay in power, and that he cannot even impose taxes on the people, because this wealth must pass wholly out of the country to Duckburg through the agent of McDuck. Furthermore, the strangers find a solution to the problem of the king's boredom. To alleviate his sense of alienation within his own country, and his consequent desire to travel to the metropolis, they arrange for the massive importation of consumer goods: "Don't worry about that food," says Donald, "I will send you some sauces which will make even fish heads palatable." The king stamps gleefully up and down.

The same formula is repeated over and over again. Scrooge exchanges with the Canadian Indians gates of rustless steel for gates of pure gold (TR 117). Moby Duck and Donald (D 453), captured by the Aridians (Arabs), start to blow soap bubbles, with which the natives are enchanted. "Ha, ha. They break when you catch them. Hee, hee." Ali-Ben-Goli, the chief says "it's real magic. My people are laughing like children. They cannot imagine how it works." "It's only a secret passed from generation to generation," says Moby, "I will reveal it if you give us our freedom." (Civilization is presented as something incomprehensible, to be administered by foreigners). The chief, in amazement, exclaims "Freedom? That's not all I'll give you. Gold, Jewels. My treasure is yours, if you reveal the secret." The Arabs consent to their own despoliation. "We have jewels, but they are of no use to us. They don't make you laugh like magic bubbles." While Donald sneers "poor simpleton,"



Moby hands over the Flip Flop detergent. "You are right, my friend. Whenever you want a little pleasure, just pour out some magic powder and recite the magic words." The story ends on the note that it is not necessary for Donald to excavate the Pyramids (or earth) personally, because, as Donald says, "What do we need a pyramid for, having Ali-Ben-Goli?"

Each time this situation recurs, the natives' joy increases. As each object of their own manufacture is taken away from them, their satisfaction grows. As each artifact from civilization is given to them, and interpreted by them as a manifestation of magic rather than technology, they are filled with delight. Even our fiercest enemies could hardly justify the inequity of such an exchange; how can a fistful of jewels be regarded as equivalent to a box of soap, or a golden crown equal to a cheap watch? Some will object that this kind of barter is all imaginary, but it is unfortunate that these laws of the imagination are tilted unilaterally in favor of those who come from outside, and those who write and publish the magazines.

But how can this flagrant despoliation pass unperceived, or in other words, how can this inequity be disguised as equity? Why is it that

imperialist plunder and colonial subjection, to call them by their proper names, do not appear as such?

"We have jewels, but they are of no use to us."

There they are in their desert tents, their caves, their once flourishing cities, their lonely islands, their forbidden fortresses, and they *can never leave them*. Congealed in their past-historic, their needs defined in function of this past, these underdeveloped peoples are denied the right to build their own future. Their crowns, their raw materials, their soil, their energy, their jade elephants, their fruit, but above all, their gold, can never be turned to any use. For them the progress which comes from abroad in the form of multiplicity of technological artifacts, is a mere toy. It will never penetrate the crystallized defense of the noble savage, who is forbidden to become civilized. He will never be able to join the Club of the Producers, because he does not even understand that these objects have been produced. He sees them as magic elements, arising from the foreigner's mind, from his word, his magic wand.

Since the noble savage is denied the prospect of future development, plunder never appears as such, for it only eliminates that which is trifling, superfluous, and dispensable. Unbridled capitalist despoliation is programmed with smiles and coquetry. Poor native. How naïve they are. And since they cannot use their gold, it is better to remove it. It can be used elsewhere.

Scrooge McDuck gets hold of a twenty-four carat moon in which "the gold is so pure that it can be molded like butter." (TR 48, US 12-2/59). But the legitimate owner appears, a Venusian called Muchkale, who is prepared to sell it to Scrooge for a fistful of earth. "Man! That's the biggest *bargain* I ever heard of in all

history," cries the miser as he closes the deal. But Muchkale, who is a "good native," magically transforms the fistful of earth into a planet, with continents, oceans, trees, and a whole environment of nature, "Yessir! I was quite impoverished here, with only atoms of *gold* to work with!" he says. Exiled from his state of primitive innocence, longing for some rain and volcanoes, Muchkale rejects his gold in order to return to the land of his origin and content himself with life at subsistence level. "Skunk Cabbage! [his favorite dish on Venus] I live again . . . Now I have a *world* of my own, with *food* and *drink* and *life*!" Far from robbing him, Scrooge has done Muchkale a favor by removing all that corrupt metal and facilitating his return to primitive innocence. "He got the dirt he wanted, and I got this fabulous twenty-four carat moon. Five hundred miles thick! Of *solid gold*! But dog-goned if I don't think he got the *best* of the bargain!" Poor, but happy, the Venusian is left devoting himself to the celebration of the simple life. It's the old aphorism, the poor have no worries, it is the rich who have all the problems. So let's have no qualms about plundering the poor and underdeveloped.

Conquest has been purged. Foreigners do no harm, they are building the future, on the basis of a society which cannot and will not leave the past.

But there is another way of infantilizing others and exonerating one's own larcenous behavior. Imperialism likes to promote an image of itself as being the impartial judge of the interests of the people, and their liberating angel.

The only thing which cannot be taken from the noble savage is his subsistence living, because losing this would destroy his natural economy, forcing him to abandon Paradise for Mammon and a production economy.

