

# A Journey of Reflection, Learning, and Activism: Our Experience of attending *Walking Against Colonialism* in Switzerland



by Amina Noureen and Huyen Trang

In February 2023, I found myself on an unexpected adventure in Zürich, Switzerland. A scheduling mix-up had me arriving a day early for Placement Officer Training, leading to an impromptu stay at a local hostel. Little did I know that this unexpected turn of events would open the door to a profound exploration of Swiss colonial history, decolonial activism, and the complexities of the chocolate industry.

As I headed towards the library to work on my thesis, a newfound friend and roommate convinced me to visit a chocolate factory. Despite the initial hesitation due to the city's reputation for being expensive, I decided to seize the opportunity. What I discovered was a fascinating journey through the history of chocolate, complete with visuals that left me in awe. However, it was the conspicuous absence of acknowledgment regarding the origins of cocoa, the colonial extraction process, and the involvement of the slave trade, which left me both shocked and contemplative.

The Placement Officer Training in Switzerland went smoothly, and I found myself in Bern attending my only class online. In a women's history class, I could not help but voice my concerns about the invisible history surrounding colonialism. As I worked as a placement officer at SCI Germany, I became more and more interested in topics of colonialism. This led me to a seminar called *Walking Against Colonialism* in Bern at the end of November, facilitated by our amazing Thomas, Sara, and Monika, where I discovered a community actively engaging in discussions on crucial historical topics through organizing Decolonial walking tours and their contemporary implications.





From 29th of November to 05th of December, we participated in a seminar on postcolonial city tours for / by young people in Bern, Switzerland. The seminar was organized by SCI Switzerland with 19 participants from Austria, Brazil, Germany, Georgia, India, Pakistan, Portugal, Tunisia, Turkey, Spain, and Vietnam. The targeted participants are very diverse in terms of age, gender, academic background, experiences, and culture, which is one of the factors that attributes to the success of the seminar.

The seminar was organized with the aims of

- providing participants with basic understanding of colonial history;
- creating a place for people who share the same interest in organizing postcolonial city tours to share knowledge, experiences, and perspectives around postcolonial history;
- improving already-existing city tours and creating new tours; and
- establishing a network of postcolonial city tour in which people can exchange knowledge and best practices.

To begin with, participants had a chance to get to know each other. Together we built a group agreement so that we could have ground rules for how to work with each other effectively and respectfully, as well as we can take part in the seminar fully and feel as safe as possible as we all come from different backgrounds. Then



we discussed the terms to be used often during the seminar to make sure that people have a common understanding of the terms, which were Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Post-colonialism, De-colonialism, Global South, Global North, Racism, White supremacy, Settler, Indigenous.



On the second day, we had a sharing session with Izabel Barros – a historian, decolonial feminist, and anti-racist activist. She briefly shared with us about the Swiss history of colonialism, her experiences as an activist in Switzerland, how to initiate debates on colonialism in public space and lessons learned. All of us were inspired by her profound knowledge and rich experiences as an activist.

Following the introduction from the organizers, we had a short city tour in Bern to visit different places connecting with colonialism. We found the tour very useful to understand to some degree about the city and its history. If we were a tourist, we would not have thought about it from the perspective of colonialism. After the tour, we sat together and shared our thoughts and experiences of the tour, we pointed out the things we liked and things that need to be improved on the tour.

From the actual tour in Bern, we brainstormed about the topics that could be taken into account when we organize a postcolonial city tour, which are:

- Religion and colonialism in city tours;
- How to get funding for postcolonial city tours;
- Intergenerational perspectives in postcolonial city tours;

- today Colonialism (continuities from colonial history, how does it relate to climate crisis);
- Capitalism and Postcolonial City Tours;
- Restitution and reparation;
- How we can act for Palestinian liberation.



We had a very interesting discussion about the topics. I was amazed at how much we could/should take into consideration when we organize a postcolonial city tour.

After all the discussion and brainstorming, we created an outline for our postcolonial city tour. At the end of the seminar, participants were able to create their own projects related to postcolonial city tours and presented them among the group.

Thanks SCI Switzerland and SCI Germany for giving us the opportunity to join this seminar. We are very grateful for the opportunity to get to know people from different countries and backgrounds who share the same values, to broaden my knowledge about colonial history and how it relates to our world today, and how to organize a postcolonial city tour. Trang plans to make a city tour in Hanoi – the capital of Vietnam for the international volunteers from her sending organization in Vietnam – Volunteers for Peace Vietnam. She will share what she has learned from the seminar with her family, friends, and those who are interested in a postcolonial



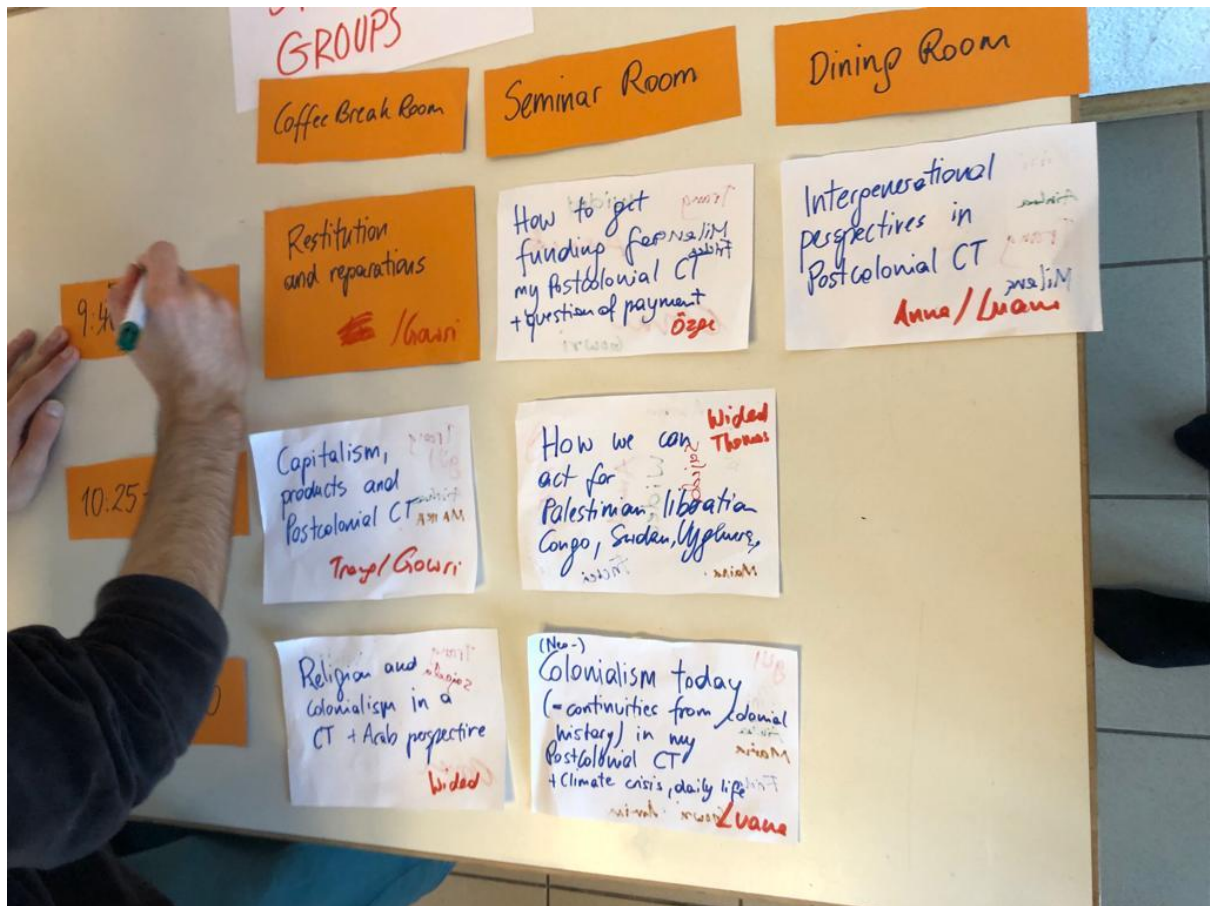
city tour. We hope there will be more similar seminars organized in the future so more people will have a chance to learn about the topic.



The seminar proved to be a resounding success. Through guest speakers and self-organized walking tours of Bern, participants delved into Switzerland's colonial history. Workshops on organizing walking tours for participants in their own cities using non-formal learning methodology, complete with checklists, plans, and funding opportunities, provided valuable insights into practical activism.

The true highlight for me was the creation of a safe space for discussing complex issues with varying perspectives. Emotional responses were recognized as valid, fostering an environment where learning could flourish. The open space format, where participants proposed discussion topics and voted on sessions, allowed for a diverse range of conversations.





I eagerly participated in sessions on funding for decolonial tours, supporting Palestine, and exploring an Arab perspective on religion and colonialism. The funding session enlightened me about available resources, including opportunities through the European Union, Council of Europe, Engagement Global, and the Oak Foundation.

The session on Palestine became an emotional space, highlighting the complexities of supporting a cause. Discussions ranged from strategic participation in demonstrations to creating and sharing content on social media, learning about history through books, and even cooking and sharing Palestinian food to spread cultural awareness.



During our breaks in Bern, we often ventured out to soak in the Bern forest's beauty. One memorable evening, the idea of a refreshing dip in the lake took hold. Despite the chilling -2-degree weather, my adventurous friend Gul took the plunge, inspiring colleagues from Turkey, Georgia, and Switzerland to follow suit. However, lacking swimwear and feeling uneasy about baring it all, I initially hesitated, fearing exclusion from the experience.

To my relief, my thoughtful colleague Milena lent me her swimsuit, though my discomfort lingered. With a gentle nudge, I overcame my reservations and joined the invigorating lake plunge, ultimately discovering it to be a life-changing experience. Witnessing my enthusiasm, my friend Gouwri joined the escapade, while Maira opted to observe from the shore, and we respected her choice.





The icy waters forged a unique bond among us, and as the cold seeped into our bones, we basked in the sun for a few moments, captured memories with photos, and hastily returned home. The evening beckoned with our commitment to crafting proposals for organizing Decolonial Tours. My contribution focused on proposing a decolonial tour in my hometown of Bahawalpur, Pakistan—a potentially challenging endeavor in securing funding, but a venture that felt both meaningful and possible.

The seminar concluded with a lively evening, complete with delicious food thanks to the kitchen team. Laughter filled the room during a

talent showcase by Monika and Nini, and a dance party featuring diverse cultural dances with Wided and Gowri stole our hearts added a touch of joy to the gathering.

As I departed for Pakistan, I carried with me a sense of joy, belonging, and newfound knowledge about colonialism, decolonial walking tours, and the power of fostering meaningful friendships. Switzerland, with its rich history and contemporary activism, had left an indelible mark on my academic and personal journey.

In reflection, the seminar reinforced the importance of addressing the invisible histories that shape our world. Swiss colonial history, marked by cultural, economic, political, and military involvement, revealed the need for a comprehensive understanding of the past. The legacy of figures like Louis Agassi and Heinrich Escher served as a reminder of the deep-seated roots of colonial ideologies.

The seminar also emphasized the role of decolonial thinking, encouraging participants to move beyond intellectual discussions and engage with the issues at a visceral level. The words of Brazilian author Paulo Freire echoed in the air, reminding us that decolonial thinking arises not only from the head but also from the feet – a call to action rooted in acknowledging and working with the pain of history.

Amidst the vast landscape of colonial histories, Switzerland emerged as a significant player with its economic ties, cultural implications, and contributions to the colonial project. The seminar acted as a catalyst, urging us to question the taste of colonialism and explore ways to dismantle its lingering effects.



In conclusion, my unexpected journey in Switzerland became a transformative

experience. The seminar provided not only knowledge but also a platform for activism, fostering connections that transcended borders. As I continue my



academic pursuits and activism, I carry with me the lessons learned in Bern – a testament to the power of education, dialogue, and collective action in the face of challenging histories.