



Colonialism

Colonialism is both a practice and a worldview. As a practice, it involves the domination of a society by settlers from a different society. As a worldview, **colonialism** is a truly global geopolitical, economic, and cultural doctrine that is rooted in the worldwide expansion of West European capitalism that survived until well after the collapse of most colonial empires.

Historically, colonies in the strict sense of "settlements" had existed long before the advent of global capitalism; the English word *colony* is derived from the ancient Latin term *colonia*, denoting an outpost or settlement. However, **colonialism** as a principle of imperial statecraft and an effective strategy of capitalist expansion that involved sustained appropriation of the resources of other societies, indeed regions, of the world for the benefit of the colonizing society, backed by an elaborate ideological justificatory apparatus, is a modern, West European invention *par excellence*, emerging from the 15th century onward.

Colonialism involved a combination of several processes, recurring with remarkable consistency across various instances. Some of these were as follows:

- Encounter and repeated/sustained contact between the Western "discoverers" and the rest of the world, typically involving invasion, conquest, strategic genocide, the relegation of local rulers to subservient roles, and, eventually, some form of settlement by West Europeans.
- The surveying and scientific analysis of the geography, resources, peoples, and customs of the colonies, with the explicit intent of facilitating resource extraction and/or unequal exchange through forced trading.
- The imposition of extractive enterprises, such as plantations, mining, and other forms of raw-material-yielding activities, and the deployment of nonfree "native" labor in such enterprises.
- The systematic destruction of indigenous industries to transform the colonies into captive markets for European goods.
- Triangular trade (the hawking of European commodities to Africa, enslaved people to the Americas/the Caribbean, and plantation products to Europe).
- The establishment of modernizationist projects, such as the construction of elaborate transportation and information infrastructures, the introduction of private property in land, specific forms of taxation, and colonial law with the purpose of enabling the extractive and disciplinary apparatus of the colonial administration.
- The forced transfer and circulation of enslaved or indentured labor between colonies, or between regions within the same colony, disrupting culturally articulated modes of interaction between nature and people, and creating buffer populations between the colonizers and the locals.
- Creation of collaborationist/comprador colonial elites, mass educational systems, and public cultures that systematically facilitated the explicit alignment of ideas such as knowledge and progress with Western civilization, thereby producing the illusion of European superiority and the normalization of colonial relations.
- Continuous and systematic framing of colonized populations as the backward, inferior, dehumanized "other" of the enlightened European/White "self," and the use of the discourse of scientific racism to this end.
- In later phases of **colonialism**, warfare using colonial populations from one colony in armed incursions against other (potential) colonies.
- Prevention of the access of colonial subject populations to Europe.

Because it involved the superimposition of the rule of an alien social order on another, violence inhered in all aspects of **colonialism**. As Aimé Césaire has pointed out, **colonialism** allowed the routine practice of all elements of what later came to be decried as Nazi violence within Europe, on non-European populations overseas.

Although **colonialism** was certainly a total system, for analytical purposes, it may be useful to approach it as a compound effect of three interconnected fields of domination: political-economic, social-institutional, and representational-symbolic. Each of these three fields is considered briefly in the following sections.

Political Economy

Given the tendency within much Western scholarship to view the rise of capitalism as a phenomenon largely rooted in the dynamics of feudalism in Europe, it is difficult to grasp the significance of **colonialism** in both the emergence of global capitalism and the making of what western Europe is today. Immediately before the colonial period, western Europe was a relatively small, spatially marginal, and economically, not particularly noteworthy appendage on the vast interlocking Afro-Eurasian system of trade. According to the estimates made by economic historian Angus Maddison, between the years 1000 and 1500 (i.e., before the full onset of **colonialism**), Africa and Asia jointly accounted for 75% to 80% of the total economic output of humankind; by contrast, western Europe's share hovered between 9% and 18%. With the construction of overseas colonial empires centered in western Europe, by 1820, Africa's and Asia's joint economic weight in the world decreased to 64%, while western Europe's grew to approximately 23%.

The 19th century saw two major transformations in the structure of colonial domination of the rest of the world by western Europe that brought further changes in the relative fortunes of these areas. On the one hand, a groundswell of successful independence movements in the first half of the century led, in most cases, by creole elites, in Latin America drastically diminished the colonial holdings of Spain and Portugal. On the other hand, the colonial penetration of South and Southeast Asia mainly under the British, the French, and the Dutch, and Africa by several West European colonizing powers intensified considerably, bringing new areas under direct colonial rule and leading to a scramble among the imperialists to carve out vast areas of these two resource-rich continents. As a result, by 1913, Africa's and Asia's joint share of the world's income diminished to a near-catastrophic level (less than 28%), while western Europe, reaching the zenith of its colonial rule, commanded an unprecedented one third of the total value produced in the world.

How did this happen? Plainly put, **colonialism** launched two relatively separate processes of global structural transformation. One could be called colonial value transfer, and the other could be called the devastation effect. The first involved the unleashing of economic, legal, and logistical mechanisms that would ensure transfer of natural resources from the colony to the metropole (e.g., deposits of minerals, most prominently silver and gold, plus, along with industrialization in western Europe and North America, other metals such as iron ore). West Europeans also initiated the production of crucial commodities such as cotton, spices, tea, and coffee and exploited slave, hence, by comparison with Europe, strikingly low-cost labor in the colonies. Extremely tilted systems of taxation and manipulation of currency rates further devalued colonial labor vis-à-vis West European capital, and they ensured the uninterrupted flow of value from the colonies to the metropole. The significance of such colonial activities cannot be overstated: For instance, it is estimated that the slave-labor-based plantation product output of the relatively small island of Saint-Domingue (later known as Haiti) alone accounted for two fifths of the entire foreign "trade" revenue of France before the Haitian revolution of 1791.

The second process instituted by **colonialism** resulting in the relative improvement of the global economic position of western Europe involved the destruction of the social, legal, political, protoindustrial, agrarian, and other technological structures of the colonized society. Imperial warfare; the displacement or murder of significant portions of populations; the destruction of the technologies, circuits of trade, and economic institutions of the indigenous societies; the forced importation of West European products; and the imposition of legal schemes alien to the existing legal practices of the colonized society, such as the enforcement of private property in land where communal access to land was the norm (introduced, to a large measure, in order to be able to impose colonial taxation on rural agricultural production) were disparate elements of colonial policy that worked together to weaken the economic, political, and social capacities of the colony. In a particularly heinous example of intentional destruction, the British East India Company, possessing a monopoly on trading opium grown in India, systematically saturated China—a powerful non-European empire that had successfully resisted

colonization—with the highly addictive substance in defiance of the repeated, explicit bans on the importation and sale of opium. The amount of opium smuggled into China by the British increased almost 100 times between the 1730s and the 1830s, resulting in an addiction epidemic of colossal magnitude, effectively undermining the Chinese state's capacity to act. The Chinese reaction was used as an excuse to wage two wars on China by the British Empire in the 19th century, contributing to the effective destruction of the Chinese Empire despite the inability of the Western powers to gain territorial control beyond a few islands and port cities.

In sum, the colonial value transfer and the incapacitation effects jointly enabled western Europe to expand its geopolitical and economic sway during the colonial period and to reap the benefits of dependencies produced during that period well after the end of formal colonial dominance. This process has been widely documented in the scholarly literature on economic, political, technological, financial, and aid dependency. The striking contemporary poverty of some of the erstwhile colonial societies is deeply rooted in these twin political economic processes of colonial value transfer and devastation as practiced throughout the centuries of colonial rule.

Social Institutions

Colonialism also produced social forms in the colonies that were distinct from those in place in Europe, even though in both contexts the driving force was the rise and expansion of capitalism. Within western Europe, the establishment of the rule of private property and the commodification of all social realms involved the production of what Antonio Gramsci called hegemony—a combination of compromise, persuasion, and the judicious use of strategic violence—through the gradual transformations of the educational, legal, religious, political, and cultural institutions as well as the structures of the public and private spheres. Colonial administrations, by contrast, bypassed most of these intervening mechanisms, routinely resorting instead to the use of force and imposing what Ranajit Guha has aptly called dominance without hegemony.

One aspect of colonial dominance without hegemony can be observed in the massive dislocation of human beings—achieved through physical, juridical, legal, or economic force—in the service of the capitalist production process. **Colonialism** generated three main institutionalized forms of human displacements: first, a large outward movement of soldiers, merchants, requisitioning agents, convicts, prospectors, administrators, farmers, missionaries, teachers, and increasingly from the early 19th century, social scientists from Europe. A second displacement involved the capture and sale of human beings as chattel slaves mainly from Africa to the Americas, the Caribbean, and to a lesser extent from South Asia to colonies in Southeast Asia, until the abolition of slavery in the mid-19th century. Third, colonial empires practiced the forced displacement of bonded and convict labor among various, often geographically distant, regions. Bonded labor was destined to work in plantations, in mines, in the building of infrastructure (such as the use of Chinese coolie labor to build the railways in North America), and in other forms of construction (such as the use of convict labor from South Asia in the early construction of the city of Singapore) throughout the 19th century.

Colonies were also treated by the colonizers as experimental spaces. Many West European ideas regarding policing (including such innovations as fingerprinting and the passport), the law, education, medical science, and technology (including psychiatric experiments) were first carried out on the “disposable” populations of the colonies. Such experimentation was made possible by the introduction of sharp, putatively ontological contrasts between metropole and the colony, the colonizer and the colonized—a worldview that turned on a very specific, hierarchical understanding of the comparative worth of populations, with European White groups at the top and all others below.

“Race” thus takes colonial difference to the level of biopolitics. It grafts moral qualities onto observed phenotypic variation and posits difference as natural and, hence, immutable. Although the 19th-century understanding of the innate, biological nature of racial difference has been proved to be baseless, these ideas have acquired a dynamic of their own and continue to shape social relations in the postcolonial world.

Social relations under **colonialism** were also deeply gendered and involved explicit sexual exploitation. Most early Europeans arriving in the colonies were men, with specific fantasies about “native” women. Although the sexual and caretaking labor of women of colonized populations—who shared a variety of relationships with European men ranging from slavery to common law marriages—was central to the very reproduction of colonial workforces in an alien world, discussions about native women as represented in colonial records, memoirs, and travelogues are typically trivialized by placing them within a larger discourse of the eroticism, sexual abandon, and general lack of morals in the colonies. Similarly, the construction of native men as effeminate or lesser men sanctioned multiple forms of subjugation—including sexual exploitation—to be imposed on them. Perhaps the most egregious examples of such exploitation involved the forced mating of enslaved men and women with the sole purpose of reproducing the labor force in a context in which marriage and family formation among the enslaved was forbidden. Sexual exploitation of the enslaved by owners was also a widespread practice.

These kinds of dehumanizing diminution of the non-European other eventually produced a range of reactions in colonized societies and a variety of strategies and experiences of anticolonialist struggles. Some, such as the Algerian resistance against the French, have embraced violent insurgency as a necessary and even salutary element of anticolonial liberation. As Frantz Fanon argued, anticolonial violence can provide a catharsis for the colonized in contexts where respect, dignity, and even humanity have been systematically denied to them. Others, such as Mohandas K. Gandhi in his struggle against British rule in India, insisted on the importance of nonviolence as a symbol of the moral superiority of the non-West over the violence of the West. Although these two movements reflect different moments in the history of anticolonial struggles, it is worth noting that both of these instances involved a process of first imagining an “inside,” the idea of a nation beyond the reach of the colonizers, and a sense of “we-ness,” based on which the political struggle against colonial rule—no matter what form it took—could be launched.

Representations

As Gayatri Spivak argues, representation has two interlocking aspects: *vertreten* (approximately meaning “step in someone’s place, represent politically in the formal sense”) and *darstellen* (roughly “re-present, place there, portray”). The tortuous history of colonial representations unfolded in a field of power marked by these two dimensions: The former severely limited the contexts in which the colonized subject could represent herself, and the latter ensured that representations were neither natural nor innocent, as they were always implicated by colonial social relations.

As the first voyages of discovery, ostensibly for God, gold, glory, and spices, were being imagined, the question of the potential conversion of natives was very much among the key preoccupations of the early colonizers. However, the practice of colonial expansion, involving such immoral acts as the robbing, slaying, and enslavement of native populations, were clearly at odds with a view of the colonial other as not only human but potentially Christian. As a result, European representations of the colonized soon acquired new configurations that locked the other increasingly into eternal savagery. By the 19th century, it was but a small step to move from this image of the irredeemably savage/heathen to a portrayal of the colonized other as naturally and immutably inadequate—a racially inferior human being.

Over time, as West European colonial rule both deepened and stabilized in various parts of the world, explicit discourses about native customs, drawing on observations and interpretations made by colonial administrators, medical doctors, educators, missionaries, and anthropologists, emerged to form veritable systems of knowledge about other societies. Indeed, European social sciences developed separate branches for studying specific colonized societies within a larger discursive framework—Orientalism, in Edward Said’s formulation, portrayed colonized cultures as eternal (hence, fixed in time and unfit for change), feminine, sensual-erotic, weak, inefficient, and essentially inferior. Colonial exhibitions, newspaper accounts, travel narratives, popular novels, guidebooks and vade mecum, operettas, popular songs, photographs, postcards, and personal accounts by former colonial personnel returning from the colonies worked together to stabilize such images of the colonies, justifying their continued subjection for the metropolitan publics.

Since the contemporary world is a direct heir to the colonial-imperial order, especially to the logic of the overseas empires centered in western Europe, the legacy of **colonialism** in all its dimensions—political-economic, social, and symbolic—has become an integral part of the common history of humankind, explained partly by the powerful presence of colonial patterns of representation in modern West European public cultures. These factors gave colonial ideas a life of their own so that even those areas of the world that had no direct experience of being either the colonized or the colonizer have not escaped the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic impact of **colonialism**.

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