

Colonialism

Concept: Colonialism

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Description Colonialism is a term which was coined in the twentieth century to designate a doctrine referring to three distinct processes: colonization, overseas expansion, and colonial rule. Colonization goes back millennia. Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans set up colonies understood as extensions or duplicates of the homeland peopled by emigrants. Settler colonies reappeared in the modern era with European penetration in the Americas and later in Algeria, Southern Africa, Australia, and Palestine among other places. Overseas expansion aimed at empire building was a more recent process. It may or may not have included large-scale colonization in the sense of settlement of populations foreign to the colony. Settlers often acted as surrogates of colonial powers. Empire building was intended to establish binding ties of dependence of foreign lands toward the home country. It developed in conjunction with the rise of market economies in Western Europe and the search for markets and sources of precious metals and other raw materials. Colonial rule is a specific form of government imposed on overseas territories by the colonial power, usually by force. Ultimate, and often immediate, authority was exercised by nominees of the colonial power.

Colonialism rested on the possibility of taking advantage of the differential in power between Europe, and later the United States and Japan, and the rest of the world. It involved violent subjugation, and sometimes displacement or extermination, of native peoples. The crudest forms of exploitation, including slave and indentured labour, were common. Several features distinguish colonialism imperialism, the most obvious one being that colonialism includes direct rule by the colonial power, whereas imperialism can function through indirect, albeit very real, control of nominally independent societies and countries. Both are blatant negations of autonomy.

The booklet entitled *Le colonialisme*, published in 1905 by the French socialist Paul Louis, introduced the noun "colonialism" into the vocabulary. In 1931, it was included for the first time in the *Larousse du vingtième siècle*, an authoritative French dictionary. The term was not neutral. It originated on the left of the political spectrum and carried with it an explicit condemnation of the processes described, their connection with capitalism, and the negative consequences of exploitation and recourse to brute force. In subsequent usage, the term colonialism came to refer both to the doctrine and to the three processes it fostered.

Disapproval of the processes preceded the creation of the term. The

founding of Spain's empire in the Americas in the sixteenth century, involving as it did, a missionary dimension, gave rise to battles between theologians about the right to conquer, subjugate, and convert "pagans." The most articulate participant, Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566), was an opponent of the enslavement of native peoples. While religious motivations meshed with the quest for spices and precious metals in the case of Portugal and Spain, economic urges were uppermost when Dutch, British, and French empire building got underway. Spreading the faith, with or without consent of the converted, became a means of control after conquest, rather than a reason for undertaking colonial expansion.

With religious proselytizing no longer providing sufficient justification, secular arguments for colonization became paramount. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, mercantilism was the dominant economic doctrine. It posited that power was measured by the accumulation of precious metals. The latter were to be garnered by all possible means, including conquest and piracy. Chief among the peaceful means was the sale of goods abroad. It followed that, in order to keep specie (or coin money) in the domestic economy, imports had to be reduced to a minimum. Self-sufficiency, tending toward absolute self-sufficiency or autarky, represented the mercantilist ideal. A prerequisite for success was the availability of foreign markets, the best being colonial outlets protected by strict legislation barring foreign rivals and forbidding manufacturing in the colonies. Since colonies represented desirable captive markets, mercantilism abetted colonial expansion. It provided the doctrinal pillar for colonization, empire building and colonial rule.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the merits of protectionism and monopoly were questioned by the rise of the doctrine of free trade. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) was a milestone in setting the new principles on firm theoretical ground. It was argued that free trade was a more profitable proposition than protectionism and the maintenance of costly colonial administrations in favour of vested interests. The point was driven home when, following the independence of the Thirteen Colonies, trade between Britain and the United States, far from grinding to a halt, grew appreciably. The French liberal economist Jean-Baptiste Say summarized the prevailing view when he wrote in his *Cours complet d'économie politique* (1803) that "the real colonies of a trading nation are the independent peoples of all parts of the world. All trading nations should wish that they all be independent in order that they may become more industrious and more prosperous. The more numerous and productive they are, the more they will provide opportunities and possibilities of trading with them."

During the first part of the nineteenth century, colonial expansion did not stop but it lost the luster attaching to a national enterprise. Free trade was the order of the day, especially in Britain where liberals questioned the need for colonies. Classical economists of the Manchester school lent legitimacy to the industrialists' need to export to any market capable of

paying, and to their distaste for spending on colonial rule.

An unexpected transformation occurred in the aftermath of the economic downturn or depression which began in 1873 in Europe and North America. Colonialism was one response to this crisis of capitalism. With barriers to trade rising, production standing still, and new competitors such as Germany and the United States industrializing, the search for new markets and sources of raw materials intensified in the direction of colonial expansion. It was presumed colonies would be useful to avert social unrest by stimulating the economy and/or by channeling the poor toward overseas possessions.

The practice, if not the doctrine, of free trade began to undergo a process of qualification. In Britain, authors like Charles Dilke, John Seeley, and James Froude extolled the growth of their country's colonial domain. In France, liberal economists looked with favour on colonial aggrandizement. Paul Leroy-Beaulieu's treatise *De la colonisation chez les peuples modernes* (1874) stressed the commercial value of colonies, their role in sustaining production in the home country and their importance as places in which to invest capital. Politicians such as Benjamin Disraeli and Joseph Chamberlain in Britain, Jules Ferry and Eugène Étienne in France, Theodore Roosevelt in the United States, and Francesco Crispi in Italy, made imperial growth their stock-in-trade. Ferry tersely defined colonial policy as "the daughter of industrial policy."

The economic crisis was concomitant with a transformation of the international context. War and the threat of war, strident nationalism, militarism, and anxiety about security were characteristics of the 1870-1914 period which spurred the quest for imperial outposts. Colonialism as a doctrine was infused with war-oriented strategic calculations, the craving for national prestige, the need to demonstrate power through territorial enlargement, and the yearning to spread one's allegedly superior culture. Racist and essentialist views were inculcated. The application to human societies of Darwinian theories of survival of the fittest intended to explain evolution in the animal world became commonplace. As well as an interest-driven movement, colonialism in imperial societies was a cultural phenomenon sustained by the fascination for exoticism and the mystique of geographic explorations. By 1914, much of the world was divided between a handful of colonial powers.

At the start of the twentieth century, the crystallization of colonialism as a doctrine and increasing acceptance by liberals of the idea that colonies had economic value elicited a radical critique that gave colonialism its lasting negative connotations. For example, P. Vigné d'Octon's *La gloire du sabre* (1900) and *La sueur du burnous* (1911) are powerful indictments of the brutality of colonialism. Confined at first to the condemnation of militarization, violence, and exploitation, socialist opposition became more focused when Lenin made the downfall of colonial rule an integral part of the struggle against capitalism.

The main source of opposition to colonialism came from the colonial world itself. Resistance took many forms, the most visible being revolts and warfare. Major uprisings and full-scale wars occurred, for instance, in Haiti (1791, 1802), Ireland (1798, 1916), Algeria (1834-1847, 1954-1962), India (1857), Indochina (1880s-1897, 1945-1975), Egypt (1919), Iraq (1920), Morocco (1921-1934), Syria (1925) and Palestine (1936). By the end of the nineteenth century, spokesmen and organized movements in the colonized countries were demanding national self-determination and, in the aftermath of the World War I, outright independence. Socialist anti-colonialism gradually combined with rising nationalism in the colonies after World War I and, even more, after World War II to culminate in decolonization and the breakup of colonial empires.

Formal colonial rule is now mostly a thing of the past and colonialism as a doctrine has few defenders. Nevertheless, informal tutelage, often called neo-colonialism, persists. Colonialism's legacy continues in the form of distorted and unviable economic structures, underdevelopment, dependency vis-à-vis former colonial powers, reliance on foreign assistance, artificial state boundaries, absence of political institutions and traditions, authoritarian rule, ethnic and religious strife, cultural alienation, and marginalization or elimination of non-Western languages.

Colonization's role in globalization is moot. It can be viewed as a first stage of globalization. The colonized world was attached (one-sidedly and against its will) to the capitalist West, thus laying foundations for globality. If globalization is but the latest phase of colonialism, then the link is direct. In contrast, if globalization is a distinct phenomenon, then colonialism and its legacy are hindrances in that, behind the outward appearances of interconnectedness and complementarity, they created sharp and durable structural divides which are obstacles to globalization.