

In the light of currently available demographic information, were the European colonial/Imperial projects a blessing or a curse for humanity - or neither?

Introduction:

Since the beginning of the modern era, and the end of the mediaeval period, European colonialism has defined much of the history of the 'new world'. Since the time of Christopher Colombus and Francis Drake, the world has changed much, but the foundations of European colonialism, Imperial interest and exploitation has not. The Global South still reels from the impacts of colonialism, as this piece will attempt to display. Examples will be given of South Africa, South America and Argentina in particular. All of these nations and regions experienced different forms of colonialism, even if just in name, and at different times in their history. However, they all experienced exploitation, the loss of capital and population due to Imperialism, and still bear the scars of their experiences with the European powers to this day.

Arms Across the Atlantic - A Tale of Two Continents:

Imperialism, under European guidance, has forged the continents of Africa and South America together since its brutal inception. The movement of slave labour from the West African coast to the European colonies in Southern and Northern America provides a display of some of the most noticeable, and violent, demographic change in history. However, the Southern half of South America saw a much smaller number of slave labour imported. D. C. M. Platt, in his work *Latin America and British Trade* refers to the region as "the White Republics of the South" (Christopher, 1973, Pg. 5), detailing just how little the slave trade between West Africa and Southern South America impacted the demographics. As in the rest of the colonial domains of the European powers, more temperate areas saw a greater influx of European settlers, and less imported slave labour from the tropics of West Africa.

However, the shift that took place in the regions of Argentina and Chile, as well as Southern Peru, was of a different kind. The policy of the Spanish colonial authorities was to extract as much profit as was possible from the region, which was rich in natural resources, such as silver. In the region around the town of Potosí, in Bolivia, the colonial authorities embarked on a process of centralising manpower and the labour force. The *Mita* as the Spanish dubbed it, was "to become the largest and most onerous scheme of labour exploitation in the Spanish colonial period" (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, Pg. 16). This process allowed for the Spanish viceroy to extract as much labour as was needed from the local Inca population to fill the mines producing silver, which led to poor living and working conditions for those forced to labour in the mines. The legacy of this policy is visible today, as detailed by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in their book *Why Nations Fail*. They describe that the poverty that can be found in the region is related to the "historical roots going

back to... [the] plan for effective exploitation of indigenous labour” (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, Pg. 18).

The foundations of labour exploitation, and the extractive institutions that Acemoglu and Robinson focus their work on, are a helpful way of looking at the situation in North Western Argentina and the far South of Peru and Bolivia. But to understand why things have not changed, and an economic recovery and expansion has not taken place, even with all the changes in the world since the fall of the Spanish colonial empire, we must examine the ‘informal’ imperial past of South America. For some British traders, the fall of Spanish influence and control over their South American colonies provided a great opportunity to “create needs and then find the means to satisfy them” (Christopher, 1973, Pg. 47). This artificial increase in market value in South America provided avenues for the creation of vast wealth for British merchants, while providing no major benefit to the South American republics economies. This is evident in the massive gaps in real GDP and living standards, which in South America are evidently lower than in Western Europe, and when compared with those of Spain and the United Kingdom are clearly at odds.

As of 2022, the United Kingdom has, according to the World Bank, a total GDP of 3.09 trillion U.S. Dollars, and Spain 1.42 trillion U.S. Dollars. Argentina however has less than half that of Spain, and sits at 631.13 billion U.S. Dollars. No other nation in South America is close to the Argentinian GDP, except for Brazil, and the Chilean, Bolivian and Peruvian GDP difference is immense (World Bank, 2022). This disparity, is, of course, not only down to the informal control that the European and North American powers have enjoyed over the markets in South America, but ignoring it and trying to look at the data without understanding the history and the legacy that the colonial powers had on the formation of the South American republics would be reckless and unfair.

South Africa: Out of the Frying Pan...

While South America gained its independence from Spain in the period between 1808 and 1822, the Republic of South Africa did not gain independence until the end of the First World War, alongside the other White Dominions of the British Empire. As Nigel Worden discusses in his book *The Making of Modern South Africa*, a similar system of discrimination, at least in practice, to the *Mita* in the South American colonies of Spain, took place in South Africa. The process by which the British secured control of their colony on the Southern tip of the African continent was by establishing, as they did across most of their African colonies, a system of colonial and racial oppression. The demographic impact of this can be seen in the changes that occurred under the brutal Apartheid regime in South Africa immediately following the Second World War, in the late 1940's.

The creation of the Apartheid state in South Africa was of course not the genesis of racism in the region, as was alluded to earlier. *The Making of Modern South Africa*

provides the description that “White racism... was embedded in the process of European colonialism... and black enslavement” (Worden, 2000, Pg. 74). Constructing the Apartheid state was simply the continuation of the process of racism and systemic oppression in the region, at a more organised and deadlier level. The National Party began to increase its support among the population of South Africa by placing a large impetus on racial issues, which popularised the movement and appealed to workers concerned of the movement of black indigenous peoples into the cities. Urbanisation was a key concern for the smaller white population who had more to lose from the availability of more, cheaper labour. As this demographic made up the majority of the voter base for the National Party, it was essential for the new political elite to remove the threat of black urbanisation as soon as possible. The National Party advocated for the “consolidation of the reserves, rigorous controls over African urban settlement, segregated facilities for coloureds and Indians, and the abolition of the white representatives of Africans in Parliament” (Worden, 2000, Pg. 104). This was the system of Apartheid, and was at the forefront of the National Party’s political bid for leadership.

Without European colonialism, the systems of Segregation and Apartheid that defined the history of South Africa in the twentieth century would not have existed. The demographic change that took place, and the movement against it, in South Africa took place under the auspices of a system that was created specifically to disenfranchise indigenous peoples, and impede on their ability to move freely through a land that they were native to. Black people could only work in urban areas if they possessed an internal passport, and were under constant surveillance by the police forces. In this context, it would be hard to argue that European colonialism and its effects were a benefit. There is no argument to be made that exists outside of a racist viewpoint that Apartheid and its previous incarnations, all of which were reliant on the creation of yet more oppressive systems, were of a benefit to South Africa and its indigenous population.

Poverty in South Africa as a result of Apartheid, the loss of labour and income revenue for the poorest members of the society is as related to the systems as it is in South America. The legacy of Segregation and Apartheid has meant the hereditary loss of wealth and land ownership, as well as the debts owed by individuals to corporations and businesses to acquire land and work. It is no surprise that the GDP of South Africa is similar to Argentina and the other South American nations that were defined by colonialism, as the systems of oppression and endemic poverty that have defined the history of both regions can be viewed, not as identical, but as having the same root cause: colonialism.

Conclusion:

The regions of South America and South Africa are an ocean apart. But they have been defined by the colonial legacy of their former imperial overlords, and in the time since their independence have suffered from the long term impacts of colonialism in

demographic terms. In South America, in Argentina, Peru and Bolivia, the endemic and persistent poverty that the *Mita* wrought through its centralisation and extraction of wealth and labour for the benefit of the Spanish colonial authorities still impacts on the infrastructure and investment in different regions. The loss of resources that would in the modern time provide income for those most in need of it, and bolster the coffers of a nation struggling with financial stability, to a foreign European power, means that the naturally resource rich south of Bolivia and Peru is devoid of real value, leaving the people there stuck living on a subsistence basis (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, Pg. 18). This persistent lack of wealth, investment and motivating factors for modernisation leaves the region almost permanently disenfranchised and more open for exploitation by foreign and internal forces.

The continued exploitation, even after the end of formal European colonial control in South America, by imperialist powers, only exacerbated this issue. Artificial creations of markets for exports to South America, and the forging of unfair trade relationships between the colonial powers and their former subjects has left South America unable to move forward on its own. Even today, poverty rates in South American nations are much higher than those in European nations, such as in Argentina. The nation has an unemployment rate of 7.2% (IMF, 2024), and a debt making up 52% of the national GDP. Therefore, it can be concluded that in the time since Argentina gained its independence, the concerted efforts by the British and other colonial powers, specifically the United States, to take advantage of the Argentine market for their own benefit has seriously impacted on the national GDP growth and real income for the population, leaving them worse off. In the case of South America, it is difficult to claim that the European colonial and imperial projects had a positive effect. The informal control that the British and American governments had on the South American markets, especially in areas such as rail and heavy industry, is hard to overlook as a major factor in slow economic growth and freedom from economic control and coercion.

In South Africa, the systems of oppression advocated for and constructed under the umbrella of colonialism and empire lasted much longer into the period of independence than in Argentina and South America. This process of systematic disenfranchisement and segregation for the benefit of a small, white class of ruling elites, built entirely upon the concerns of white workers in urban environments who were worried about their labour becoming cheaper with the movement of black South Africans into the cities. Since the colonial authorities were interested in mostly advancing the financial and economic output of the colony, and settling white workers and colonists in the best land would allow for that to happen, as the native populations were understandably not interested in losing their homes, the policies of Segregation and Apartheid were inevitable by-products of British colonialism.

From the beginning of the National Party's rule over South Africa, starting in 1948, the systems of Apartheid were constructed and completed with the support of a

population fearing the “African urban influx” and the “apparent inability of the state to deal with the rising tide of black protest” (Worden, 2000, Pg. 104). Understanding how the preexisting colonial class system impacted on the decisions of the white working class to support the National Party and its plans for a totally segregated society should explain why, to the indigenous population and not the white settlers, the British colonial project in South America is a curse. The remains of Apartheid still define South Africa, with the ruling African National Congress struggling in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the National Party to meet the demands of its supporters, an issue which persists to this day. Even now, former president of the ANC and of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, has ditched his old party in favour of a more nationalist, reactionary choice (Chothia, 2024).

Colonialism has defined South Africa since the first European settlers arrived. And in that time, it has seen great change, upheaval and conflict. It is for that reason, and for the others outlined in detail throughout this piece, that the conclusion has to be drawn that the European colonial and imperial projects were a disaster for the peoples, resources and nations that they touched. As we saw in South America, the long term impacts of trade and exploitation by a European power bled the resources, wealth and prosperity from the region - and in South Africa, how similar systems introduced under the Spanish in their colonies led to the creation of the Apartheid state and its collapse. Understanding why and how imperialism destroyed the lives of so many people is crucial in analysing why its legacy is overwhelmingly negative in the nations that it plundered, and how, even though the empires of Britain and Spain are long gone, what the impacts of them were. The impact, as far as a conclusion for this piece is concerned, is that the European colonial and imperial projects were, for all intents and purposes, a curse.

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