

PART I



The Beginnings and Growth of the Modern World

CHAPTER 1

One World, Big Problems



SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG

Almost everyone would agree that there is something terribly wrong with the world today. There is too much poverty, too much hunger, too much war, and an oversupply of anger; too little clean air and water, and for most of the world's people, nothing like enough of *anything* that makes life liveable or even possible.

But why is it so?

How can the richest, the most productive, and the most knowledgeable world in history at the same time be a world in which almost half of its 6 billion people suffer and die in poverty? At the same time a few million people are multimillionaires and about 500 are even billionaires. (See UNICEF.)

How is it that 14,000 children die from malnutrition every day in poor countries, while their countries' farmers are ruined by the agricultural policies of the rich countries?

How can it be that, although more and better education is wanted and badly needed by so many, teachers in the USA (the world's richest country) have trouble getting a job? They are told, "Sorry — there is not enough money." At the same time, there is enough money for \$500 billion a year to be spent on the military.

That's the short list. It sounds crazy — and it is. Explaining how it got this way, but need not stay this way, is one purpose of this book.

Understanding by itself cannot bring about needed and desirable changes. Political work is necessary. But if we are to know what to work for and what to fight against, we must understand how and why such a cruel, insane, and dangerous world came to be and why it keeps getting worse.

ROOT CAUSES: THE BIG FOUR

The next chapters of *Part 1* argue that what is wrong today is a result of four major developments. I call them "The Big Four."

The Big Four are

1. Colonialism (which became imperialism)
2. Capitalism
3. Nationalism
4. Industrialism

The Big Four are not things, as such—they are names for *processes*. They did not start at the same time, but as each one took hold, it fed the others. From their beginnings, The Big Four have been linked to each other in processes of mutual dependence. Once begun, they interacted with—or better—*infected* each other in ways that have brought out the *worst* in all of them.

As each of the Big Four came to be, grew, and strengthened, it was stimulated and strengthened and (more often than not) worsened by the others, and the others by it, with all of them worsened by pervasive racism. As with our bodies, all the elements of the social process are organically (that is, functionally) connected and interdependent.

In their interactions, The Big Four created and still define the modern world. We should realize that unless we can begin to reflect upon their influence, they will continue in intimate detail to describe and constrain the way we look at things. They are our past, our present, and our peculiar set of blinders.

The nature and history of the Big Four will be discussed in the next four chapters. First, a note before we begin.

COLUMBUS AND COLONIALISM: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Colonialism was the first of The Big Four to appear, and it was essential for the beginnings and development of the other three. But although colonization itself was led by two Western European nations—Portugal and Spain—they were among the last to become industrial capitalist nations. Because they modernized late, by the end of the nineteenth century—by which time capitalism, nationalism, and industrialism had become strong in other countries—Portugal and Spain were so weak that *they themselves* became economic colonies of Britain.

More importantly, it will be shown that colonialism's brutal and ugly characteristics—racism, violence, ruthlessness, and greed—were injected into the veins of the other three, bringing out the worst in all of them. Their pernicious influence is demonstrated most clearly in capitalism, which soon became and still remains the dominant member of The Big Four.

So, what was brutal and ugly about colonialism? A part of the answer was given by Columbus, one of colonialism's explorer-heroes. He kept a log (the sea captain's diary) of his experiences and his thoughts during his four expeditions to what became Spanish colonies.

The quoted excerpt below concerns his first expedition (1492), when he landed in the Bahamas. He thought he had landed in India (thus "Indians"). It is all too representative of what was on its way:

They...brought us parrots and balls of cotton... and many other things, which they exchanged for glass beads and hawks' bills. They willingly traded everything they owned ...They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features ...They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for when I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of [sugar] cane ...They would make fine servants ...With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want... As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first Island which I found, I took some of the natives by force in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts. (Quoted in Zinn)

In his four expeditions to the new world, Columbus and other explorers enslaved and murdered thousands of "Indians," Why? Usually, for failing to bring them sufficient amounts of gold. But sometimes, as we might say today, "just for the hell of it."

Unfortunately, Columbus was not at all unusual, atypical, or exceptional. He all too well personified the arrogance, greed, and racist scorn for others which have been central to the functioning of The Big Four from their beginnings to the present.

So it went — brutal exploitation, decimation, sometimes extirpation — for the peoples native to the conquered areas. And things were even worse for the enslaved—from Africa and the Americas and for South and East Asians. (See E. Williams, *From Columbus to Castro*, and Wright, *Stolen Continents*.)

Colonialism began in the late 1400s. As the 1700s ended, it had covered the world, paving the way for the birth and then the strengthening of capitalism, nationalism, and industrialism.

Since then, the world has changed, a lot—both for better and for worse. But there is no acceptable excuse for the changes for the worse. In *Part III* we analyze the problems of today. Many of them are brought on by globalization, today's version of colonialism.

THE PROBLEM OF POWER TODAY

There is a great difference between the past and the present that must be emphasized: The opportunities for the world today are *utterly unprecedented*. Before the twentieth century, problems such as poverty, hunger, poor health, and disease were taken for granted as a normal part of life. Now they can be done away with. In the modern world, they need not and should not exist *anywhere on earth*.

Saying that requires that we examine the word *problem*. Consider: When we see something as a problem, consciously or unconsciously, what we are noting is a gap between what is and what could be. We acknowledge that whatever is wrong can be fixed. If something is immutable, unchangeable, it's not a problem—it's a given. But if something is seen as a problem, then somehow, somewhere, we conclude there has to be a solution. By definition.

When the seventeenth century English philosopher Hobbes wrote of life as being “nasty, brutish, and short” for the people of his time and place, that was not a problem—it was simply a matter of *ah well, that's life*. Hobbes accepted the nasty-brutish-short state of affairs as unalterable, because at that time in his England, there really *was no way* for most of the people to have lives that would be decent, comfortable, and long. That was the reality.

But that was then. Now modern science and technology make it possible for all of the peoples of the world to live well; yet, every day the problems afflicting most of the world's people get worse. Think of it: *Today although all could live well, most live worse than ever*.

The world suffers because of the maldistribution of *power*. In short, power is influencing or deciding what will and won't be done. To have power is to be listened to. The choosing of the directions and setting policies in the world are matters of power. But power is held by a tiny, tiny minority at the top of society, while misery resides at the bottom. That vital and complicated matter will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 4 and again in *Part III*. But here let me offer some introductory comments.

U.S. POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY

Power comes in many forms: economic, cultural, political, military. And power is the basis for determining what can be done, what will be done, and—just as important—what will *not* be done. (If, for example, an elected official is convinced that the government should not have a role in, say, social programs or

regulation of industry, then legislation promoting such programs or enforcement of existing laws in this regard will be resisted, stonewalled, curtailed, zeroed out, stymied at every turn. Things important to do will not be done.)

In every respect, the USA is the most powerful nation in the world today and the most powerful in all of history. The USA has held that position since World War II. Power creates responsibility. Whether they accept it or not, people and institutions with power have the responsibility for the decisions they make or influence.

Because the USA has had and still has a huge share of economic, military, and social power in the world, we in the USA also bear the greatest responsibility for what goes wrong. And we have the major responsibility *to right what is wrong*.

In *Part III*, how the USA has used its vast power—that is, what the USA has and has not done—will be examined at length. There it will be seen that, if the USA would lead the way (and sometimes get out of the way), *all* of today’s problems could be dealt with desirably and effectively in a few years—or at most, in a few decades. Instead, at this moment, the many peoples of the world are faced with always greater instability and rising dangers. And on their own, they simply don’t have the *power* to fix things.

Of course, what the USA does or does not do is not all that matters, but our great power is decisive for determining whether there will be economic well-being or poverty, peace or war, social decency or inhumanity. That is saying a lot.

In what follows it will be shown that the USA has much to answer for in this regard. Instead, it is customary for us (and especially our leaders) to take the credit for what goes well, whether at home or abroad, and project the blame for what’s wrong *onto the victims themselves*.

This blindness, this hypocrisy, this sea of moral bankruptcy is not limited to the present; nor is it restricted to the USA. What is unique is the virtually unchallengeable economic and military power of the USA in shaping the main drift of foreign affairs, and our immense wealth and economic power to deal with what’s lacking at home. And because we have the power, we have the responsibility.

The years of U.S. world dominance are discussed in *Part III*: What have we done (and not done)? It will be shown that in the past half century the USA has repeatedly acted in high-handed and destructive ways; economically in its globalization policies, militarily in Vietnam, Iraq, and several other areas. In this time of untrammelled misery, when even continued human life on the planet is threatened, the USA is largely responsible for bringing the world to the cliff’s edge.

Now some ancient history. We turn to colonialism, the earliest of The Big Four.