

## CHAPTER 2

# Colonialism: The Earliest of The Big Four



### MEDIEVAL SOCIETY AND EUROPEAN EXPANSION

#### *Before Colonialism*

Ancient societies came into being and had endured for thousands of years before modern colonialism's beginnings in the 1400s. Along the way there were many "civilized" societies—that is, societies with *cities*. The best-known were in Asia and the Middle East. Those earlier developments were the basis for what began to grow in the trading cities of Western Europe in the Middle Ages. (See V. Gordon Childe.) The main *economic* reasons for what would become colonialism were created by the trading activities of merchants in those pre-modern cities.

#### *The Beginning of European Expansion*

Attempts to expand began to occur early in European history. Then, no later than the eleventh century and continuing for several centuries more, a series of Christian *Crusades* began. They were most successful and most harmful in the Muslim areas. Although carried out in the name of religion, from the beginning the European invasions also had economic and political motives.

The underlying motivations were far from hidden in the Crusades from the thirteenth century led by the Venetians, with Venice being the leading mercantile city of the time. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Venetians sacked Constantinople. When as a result, the Byzantine Empire was partitioned, the Venetians gained a great deal of territory in the Aegean Sea. Venetian business and power prospered. So religion?

But whatever the motivation, all of those early efforts were effectively confined within or near the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. What is now called colonialism ultimately had no such geographic limits. (See Braudel.)

As noted in Chapter 1, Portugal and Spain were the first to undertake global colonization, whether in Africa, the "Americas," or Asia. They did not have the

most advanced trading cities, but they were among the first European societies to become *nations*. This status, together with their location on or near the Atlantic Ocean, gave them an advantage over others, because of the ability both to finance and to protect their adventures. So it was easier for Portugal and Spain than for other Europeans to venture around all the coasts of Africa and, most crucially, to sail across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and to all of the Americas. Their control over the gold and silver and sugar and the region's slave trade enriched them, but it also diminished their inclination to become full-fledged members of the modern world. (See Parry.)

In the sixteenth century, the trading and financial activities of northern European merchants continually expanded, both quantitatively and geographically. The merchants' growing economic strength in, among other cities, London, Bruges, Amsterdam, Paris, Leipzig, and Lubeck increased not only their wealth, but also their political power relative to the other two members of the late medieval power elite—the Church and feudal lords.

As the sixteenth century ended, slowly but steadily improving technologies made possible larger, stronger and swifter boats—in the making of which the Dutch soon took the lead. Those more advanced boats, plus improving geographical knowledge, strengthened the impulse for the northerners to sail out and beyond the eastern and southern Mediterranean regions.

The Portuguese had begun to explore along the west coast of Africa and beyond in the 1440s. By 1493, both Spain and Portugal were laying claim to islands in the Atlantic and the Caribbean and in South America. In 1493, they agreed upon a north-south Line of Demarcation. The lands to its east (for example, Brazil and the Azores) were Portugal's; those to its west (for example, Cuba and Bolivia and Chile) were Spain's. Of course, no one ever considered consulting the peoples native to those areas in the matter—a dangerous habit that still persists.

Remarkably, the famous (so-called) “explorers” for Spain were not Spaniards at all, but northern Italians: *Cristoforo Colombo*, possibly from Genoa (*Christopher Columbus* in English); Giovanni Caboto, from the Venice area, who made his base in England and became known as *John Cabot*; and *Amerigo Vespucci* of Florence, after whom the Americas were named.

### *The Emergence of Nations*

As the wealth, power and broadening efforts of the northern European merchant class grew, it also became both possible and necessary for there to be the *centralized* political power that could combine the strengths and interests of several cities

and the land into those of a *nation*—so that they, too, could join the well-armed overseas colonial race.

Although Spain and Portugal had led that race, their kings and cardinals were more concerned with The Flag and The Cross than with economic affairs; so they fell behind. So it was that over time, because the stronger economies of the North also made for military superiority, both Portugal and Spain came to be dominated by the British (up through the nineteenth century).

Until the end of the eighteenth century, however, the British were second to the Dutch. Why? Because the Dutch, as the first *mass producers* of the larger and swifter ships had become immensely rich, both from using and from selling them. (See Boxer.) The Dutch won the colonial race early in the seventeenth century and stayed in front in both trade and finance until late in the eighteenth century. The Dutch population, however, was very small and almost without natural resources. (They built all of those dikes to get more dry land to cultivate.)

As would happen again and again to other leaders, the Dutch were ultimately surpassed in both economic and military strength by those following. They lost out to the very people to whom they had sold most of their ships and lent most of their money—the British.

*Item* With many variations, the same loss of power happened to the British in the nineteenth century. (See *Part II*.) Britain's main borrowers were Germany and the USA. By 1900, both of them were economically and militarily stronger than their British lender. And today, something quite similar seems to be well on its way for the USA relative to China. (This latest development is covered in *Part III*.)

Until the 1700s, European economic life had been very much dominated by the trading cities or (in the case of Germany) by city alliances, such as the Hanseatic League. The always expanding trade and finance of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were much strengthened by colonialism—as was the power of emerging capitalists of the era.

### THE FIRST COLONIAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM

As the need for centralized control became more pressing, and as the national state became common, the social system evolved that came to represent those aims. It was called *mercantilism*. It was very much looser than—but ultimately produced—the industrial capitalist system of the strong states of the nineteenth century and later.

The essence of mercantilism was national economic protection. Nations endeavored to trade internationally in order to acquire bullion (which *everyone* wanted). The idea was to maximize the exports, minimize imports (through tariffs), and use the bullion acquired to finance wars, cover mounting government expenses, and promote further expansion. Mercantilism was the first example of direct governmental intervention and control in the economic affairs of a nation.

As trade expanded and became more complex in the seventeenth century, the merchants, financiers, and skilled workers had organized into *guilds* in order to protect what they had—and to gain even more. (See Heckscher.) With the dawning of industrial capitalism, those protections (for the workers) were seen as a hindrance by the neophyte capitalists, who wanted and needed control of labor. It was in this context that Adam Smith (1776) and David Ricardo (1817) sought to get rid of the guilds (by calling for “free markets” and “free trade”). (See Hunt.)

In the discussion of capital and capitalism of the next chapter, it will be seen that the heartbeat of capitalism’s life as a socioeconomic system is always increasing capital accumulation. Karl Marx (1818–1883) was the first to subject the capitalist system to a sustained critical analysis. In fact, he was the first to call the system *capitalism*. Marx saw the several centuries of colonialism’s *primitive accumulation* as the essential early basis of capitalism:

The discovery of gold and silver in [Latin] America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginnings of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the hunting of black skins [were the early bases for capital] accumulation. (*Capital*)

The capital that accumulated in the colonial era was almost entirely based upon the lands and the slaves stolen from the conquered areas. That accumulation of capital depended mostly upon ships and guns, and as noted earlier, the Dutch were in the lead in producing and using both. Thus, by the seventeenth century, the Dutch had established areas of control all over the world—in parts of Asia; in North America (for example, the town of *Nieuw Amsterdam*, which later became New York City); in the Caribbean; and in Africa. For a century or two, Holland was the richest country in the world. But, as noted above, it could not stay ahead forever.

With colonialism, nations were competing for money from the always growing international trade in spices from the Far East and slaves from Africa. But each

country also sought to beat back the conflicting aims of other new nations *within* Europe. In the entire seventeenth century, there were only 4 years without war. (See Boxer.)

## THE CRIMES OF COLONIALISM

The geographic expansion of the old world into the new stimulated the emergence of capitalism, nationalism, and industrialism — for better and for worse. As we go on, it will be seen that all of The Big Four had both sides to them. Some people benefitted; most didn't. So it was with colonialism.

Colonialism created a complex set of changes for the better for the very thin upper crust of the peoples of the *colonizing* societies. In the *colonized* societies, however, except for their caciques (local merchants and chiefs), *everyone* suffered an always accelerating and deepening set of tragedies. (See Nordholdt, *The People That Walk in Darkness*.)

How could colonialism *not* have been a tragedy?

From its very beginning and up through the subsequent imperialist and globalization periods (to be discussed later), throughout the invasions and military occupations of colonized areas, the controlling powers saw both the occupied lands and their people as an absolutely marvelous source of cheap labor and natural resources. There are no known instances of the native peoples being treated as fully human. Among the many crimes committed by *all* of the colonial powers, two stand at the top of a very long list:

1. *Massive slavery* The enslavement of millions of people
2. *Wholesale theft* The stealing of land from those not already enslaved

### *The Worst Crime of All: Slavery*

We look first at the worst crime of all, slavery. As colonialism increasingly came to be concerned with trade, the two main elements being traded, as noted earlier, were spices and human beings.

When we use the word *spices* today, what we think of are things that spice up our foods — pepper, cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg...But they were a small part of the spice trade. There were at least 350 different spices. What they had in common was their lightness and smallness. They were easy and cheap to carry on long voyages in what we would see as funny little boats. It wasn't until the steamships of the nineteenth century that bulky, heavy things like coal and steel were traded overseas.

The larger, more profitable, and much more horrifying trade was in human

beings. A slave trade, like racism, had existed long before colonialism began, most commonly in the enslavement of Africans to be sold in the richer societies of the Middle East and North Africa. But what in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would become a much larger slave trade awaited the opening up of the Americas, especially what became the USA.

Like spices, slaves were cheap to carry for long distances. Efforts toward their maintenance were minimal. They were literally stacked up in cramped bunks for voyages of many weeks, given little food and water or even the ability to move—with all that *that* meant in terms of disease, deprivation, weakness, and death.

It is estimated that about 20 million Africans were captured and sold as slaves to be transported to the Americas—increasingly North America. Of those 20 million, only about a quarter of the Africans survived the ocean voyage. Three out of four died—15 million deaths en route. But also like spices, slaves could be sold for a tidy profit. And it was cheaper simply to go collect more victims than to improve the conditions of transport. (See Wright, *Stolen Continents*.)

Although many whole families were captured, they were almost always brutally separated when sold in “America.” (See Nordholdt, *The People That Walk in Darkness*, and E. Williams.)

The European-dominated slave trade began its growth, from the thousands, to the millions in the seventeenth century. Its first appearance in North America was in *Puritan* Massachusetts, in 1619. The slave trade was made illegal for the British in the early nineteenth century. That strictly regional limitation did not, however, affect the buyers and sellers from the USA, the Caribbean, or Latin America, and they continued to buy and sell human beings. In fact, New England, the business center of the USA in the eighteenth century and up to our Civil War, was critically dependent upon and made rich by the slave trade. As Thorstein Veblen put it:

The slave trade was never a ‘nice’ occupation or an altogether unexceptionable investment. . . . In conjunction with its running-mate, the rum-trade, it laid the foundations of some very reputable fortunes at that focus of commercial enterprise that presently became the center of American culture, and so gave rise to some of the country’s Best People. At least so they say. Perhaps also it was, in some part, in this early pursuit of gain in this moral penumbra that American business enterprise learned how not to let its right hand know what its left hand is doing; and there is always something to be done that is best done with the left hand. (Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times*)

And the country itself was beholden. The main basis for the growing strength of the U.S. economy both before and after independence was its rich agriculture; but that in turn was critically dependent upon slave labor. It was very different for Great Britain, as will be seen in the next chapter.

### *The Theft of Land*

In the agricultural lands of what became colonies, almost all of the people had made a sparse or even a good living on long-held land, not for export, but for survival and their own well-being. Their lands were their livelihood. But they were more than that; they were the basis for their culture, their freedom, and their dignity. And they were agriculturally rich. The lands were also rich in minerals (gold, silver, lead, iron, coal, oil, titanium)—and in rubber. (See Wright.)

These lands were the basis for the second giant crime of colonialism. The colonized peoples had their lands stolen from them. This theft occurred all around the globe—in all of Africa and Latin America, in much of Asia and the Middle East, and over most of North American (where it was euphemistically termed “Indian Removal”). This massive thievery began the moment that colonization began. It expanded with nineteenth century imperialism, and continues as this is written, through the consequences of the current version of “free trade.” (For nineteenth century imperialism, see *Part II*.)

## TODAY: CHAOS AND DISLOCATION

More often than not, in pre-colonial times what life had meant was great hardship and many difficulties; but the difficulties were those imposed by nature, not by heavily-armed and pitiless outsiders.

From the 16th century to the present, modernization, whether for those in Africa or South America or Asia, meant more than the intrusion of merciless foreigners. It also came to mean dangerous emigrations to hostile countries—only to be mistreated once more. And this is the unhappy state of affairs today—*especially* today.

Colonialism was only the beginning. In Chapter 4, when we discuss nationalism (and when we do so again in *Part II*) it will be seen that *imperialism* acted more deeply and harmfully than colonialism.

And today the dislocation is greater than ever. In *Part III*, we will see that today’s *globalization* has been even more destructive than the earlier assaults of colonialism and imperialism, as more millions have been uprooted, forced into emigration, and their societies plunged toward chaos—while at the same time

Mother Nature has been pushed toward massive, perhaps irreversible damage. (See E. Williams, *From Columbus to Castro*; And Magdoff.)

We now turn to the other three of The Big Four— first and most important, capitalism.