

## Topic Page: [Colonialism](#)

Definition: **colonialism** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Control by one country over a dependent area or people. Although associated with modern political history, the practice is ancient. In European colonial history, economic, political and strategic factors were involved in the colonial enterprise, which created the world empires of countries such as Britain and France, subjugating mainly African and Asian states and often creating artificial boundaries. After World War 2, colonialist exploitation was widely recognized, and powers conceded independence to their colonies. See *also* imperialism



Image from:

[COLONIALISM IS VIOLENCE IN ITS NATURAL STATE: in Big Ideas Simply Explained: The Politics Book](#)

Summary Article: **Colonialism**

From *Blackwell Encyclopedias in Social Sciences: The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*

The term colonialism describes a dominant form of cultural exploitation that developed with the expansion of Europe over the last 400 years. The term “colony” stems from the Latin word *colonus* meaning “a small farm” and thus originates in the practice of occupying and cultivating land. Although many earlier civilizations had colonies and although they perceived their relations with them to be one of a central imperium in relation to a periphery of provincial, marginal, and barbarian cultures, a number of crucial factors entered into the construction of the post-Renaissance practices of imperialism.

Edward Said offers the following distinction: “ ‘imperialism’ means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; ‘colonialism’, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory” (Said 1993: 8). What distinguishes the modern European empires from the Roman or the Spanish or the Arab, according to Said, is that they are systematic enterprises, constantly reinvested. They do not move into a country, loot it and leave. What keeps them there is not simple greed, but massively reinforced notions of the civilizing mission.

The scale and variety of colonial settlements generated by the expansion of European society after the Renaissance shows why the term colonialism has come to be seen as a distinctive form of the more general ideology of imperialism. Although Said’s formula, which uses “imperialism” for the ideological force and “colonialism” for the practice, is a generally useful distinction, European colonialism in the post-Renaissance world became a sufficiently specialized and historically specific form of imperial expansion to justify its current general usage as a distinctive kind of political ideology. This means that the generic term “colony,” referring to a settlement in a particular place, could be seen as one form of a more general operation of European colonialism. For instance, while India might not be technically described as a “colony” its history was, for about 200 years, determined by the economic, military, and cultural impact of British colonial occupation.

The fact that European post-Renaissance colonial expansion was coterminous with the development of a modern capitalist system of economic exchange meant that the perception of the colonies as primarily established to provide raw materials for the burgeoning economies of the colonial powers was greatly strengthened and institutionalized. This is the position of Immanuel Wallerstein’s World

System Theory (1980, 1991), which saw capitalism as the world system since the sixteenth century and instrumental in separating the world into a center, periphery, and semiperiphery. Colonies became useful as providers of raw material and to a lesser extent as markets, with their impoverishment, according to the world-system theory, being necessary to maintain the prosperity of the centre. Such a situation also meant that the relation between the colonizer and colonized was locked into a rigid hierarchy of difference deeply resistant to fair and equitable exchanges, whether economic, cultural, or social.

In colonies where the subject people were of a different race, or where minority indigenous peoples existed, the ideology of race was also a crucial part of the construction and naturalization of unequal intercultural relations. The concept of “race” itself, with its accompanying racism and racial prejudice, was largely a product of the same post-Renaissance period, and a justification for the treatment of enslaved peoples after the development of the slave trade of the Atlantic Middle Passage from the late sixteenth century onwards. In such situations the idea of the colonial world became one of a people intrinsically inferior, not just outside history and civilization, but genetically predetermined to inferiority. Their subjection was not just a matter of profit and convenience but also could be constructed as a natural state. The idea of the “evolution of mankind” and the survival of the fittest “race,” in the crude application of Social Darwinism, went hand in hand with the doctrines of imperialism that evolved at the end of the nineteenth century.

The sexist exclusivity of these discourses (man, mankind, etc.) demonstrated their ideological alliance with patriarchal practices, as numerous commentators have noted. As a result of these new formulations, colonization could be (re)presented as a virtuous and necessary “civilizing” task involving education and paternalistic nurture. An example of this is Kipling’s famous admonition to America in 1899 to “Take up the White Man’s Burden” after their war against Spain in the Philippines rather than follow their own anti-colonial model and offer the Filipinos independence and nationhood (Kipling, 1899: 323–324). In this period, and for these reasons, colonialism developed an ideology rooted in obfuscatory justification, and its violent and essentially unjust processes became increasingly difficult to perceive behind a liberal smokescreen of civilizing “task” and paternalistic “development” and “aid.” The development of such territorial designators as “Protectorates,” “Trust Territories,” “Condominiums,” and so on served to justify the continuing process of colonialism as well as to hide the fact that these territories were the displaced sites of the increasingly violent struggles for markets and raw materials by the industrialized nations of the West.

In the case of the non-indigenous inhabitants of settler colonies, the idea of a cultural inferiority exceeded that of mere provincial *gaucherie* as race permeated even the construction of “white” settlers. These were frequently characterized as having wholly degenerated from contact with other races (“gone native” in popular parlance), as in the case of white Creoles in the West Indies (Brathwaite 1971), or, in the case of settler colonies such as Canada or Australia, as having developed specific limited colonial characteristics (physical prowess, sporting ability) but not others (cultural and social sophistication). The same practice of characterizing “colonial” peoples by signifiers of naivety, of social and cultural provinciality and of originary taint (e.g., “Irishness” was imported from the internal discriminations of Britain in the Victorian period to its colonialist constructions of both America and Australia) was a feature of English texts even as late as the early twentieth century.

This was so even for Americans, despite independence and the radical shift in their own power position in the world at large after American industrialization in the late nineteenth century (see, for

example, the presentation of Americans in such late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century texts as Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, or Shaw's *Man and Superman*). Thus the negative construction of self was as important a feature of self-representation for settler colonies as for colonies of occupation where race and the idea of an alien or decayed civilization were a feature of colonial discrimination. (Although Canada had achieved independent status in the 1870s and Australia became an independent federation in 1900, the people of both these settler colonies retained many symbolic links that emphasized their continuing dependence on the imperial centre; thus, for example, Australians did not carry separate and distinctive national passports until 1946.) By the end of the nineteenth century, colonialism had developed into a system of ahistorical categorization in which certain societies and cultures were perceived as intrinsically inferior.

In Britain, at least, and arguably elsewhere too, by the end of the nineteenth century, a domestic program for the function of empire could be clearly discerned, as Victorian society faced increasing internal dissension and division (Disraeli's "Two Nations"). The doctrine of the New Imperialism was in many ways Disraeli's response to his perception that Britain was divided into two nations of rich and poor, industrial and non-industrial. Empire became the principal ideological unifier across class and other social divisions in Britain. It was to be the principal icon of national unity in the face of the widely perceived social threat of class unrest and revolution that had arisen in post-industrial British society. Another (the colonized) existed as a primary means of defining the colonizer and of creating a sense of unity beneath such differences as class and wealth and between the increasingly polarized life of the industrialized cities that developed the wealth and that of the traditional countryside to which its beneficiaries retreated or retired. The colonialist system permitted a notional idea of improvement for the colonized, via such metaphors as parent/child, tree/branch, and so on, which in theory allowed that at some future time the inferior colonials might be raised to the status of the colonizer. But in practice this future was always endlessly deferred.

It is significant that no society ever attained full freedom from the colonial system by the involuntary, active disengagement of the colonial power until it was provoked by a considerable internal struggle for self-determination or, most usually, by extended and active violent opposition by the colonized. It is one of the great myths of recent British colonial history in particular that the granting of independence to its colonies was the result of a proactive and deliberate policy of enlightenment on the part of the British people, a policy that distinguished British colonialism from the inferior and more rapacious European brands. Such readings are, of course, part of the construction of the ideology of late nineteenth-century imperialism in which literary representation played a vigorous part, whether actively as in the work of Kipling, or in a more ambivalent way in the works of Conrad. Despite the anti-imperial strain in some of his writing, Conrad continues to distinguish actively between the English model of colonialism, which has "an ideal at the back of it," and the mere rapacity of the imperialism of "lesser breeds" of imperialists. These specious distinctions are projected back into the narratives of the rapacious Spanish conquistadores, though the British treatment of the Indians in Virginia differed from that of the Spanish only in quantity, not in the degree of its brutality (Hulme 1986).

Even the granting of Dominion status or limited independence to white settler cultures was the result of long constitutional and political struggles and was made dependent on the retention of legal and constitutional links with the Crown that limited the right of those societies to conduct their own affairs and to develop their own systems of justice or governance. In such societies, of course, the indigenous peoples were not granted even the most limited form of citizenship under these new constitutional

models. In Western Australia, for example, even in the 1920s, the government department that had charge of Aboriginal affairs was called the Department of Fisheries, Forests, Wildlife and Aborigines. Recent attempts to “offload” the guilt of colonial policies onto the colonial “settlers” as a convenient scapegoat emphasize the periods when metropolitan, government policy was more enlightened than that of the local settlers. But in general such ideological discriminations were in no sense alien to the spirit of the metropolitan, colonial powers that had set up these colonies, nor did this essentially discriminatory attitude on the part of the “home” country change after the granting of federal or Dominion status. Racial discrimination was, in the majority of cases, a direct extension of colonial policy and continued to receive both overt and covert support from the ex-colonial powers as well as from the newly emerging power of America throughout the period up to and even after World War II.

Such policies of racial discrimination reached their nadir in South African apartheid, which had its roots in earlier colonial discriminatory policies (Davidson 1994). In the case of societies where the factor of race was less easily resolved by such internal discriminatory categorizations, the importance of racial discrimination was even more obvious. British India and European African colonies, for example, had to engage in a long and frequently bloody process of dissent, protest and rebellion to secure their independence. It is also significant that in those cases where European colonial powers held on longest, for example the Portuguese colonies, they were often able to do so and indeed were encouraged to do so by the degree to which their colonial governments were really only a front for a “broader imperialism,” as Amilcar Cabral himself noted 1973. Similarly, the nationalist government in South Africa was able to survive only because it was supported by the investment of those very countries that were supposedly opposed to the regime. Thus colonialism, far from disappearing as the century passed, too often merely modified and developed into the neocolonialism of the post-independence period.

SEE ALSO: Colonialism, neo-Imperialism; Globalization; Postcolonialism; Race; Racism.

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