

Empire

How Britain made the modern world

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The subtitle indicates that this is, if not exactly a celebration, at least a substantial apology of the British Empire. Colonialism has a bad press, connected as the notion has become to racism and exploitation. In fact it has become fashionable to divide mankind into oppressors and victims, and as a consequence setting up claims for redress involving astronomical sums. It is not clear how those sums have been calculated, even less so how they are expected to be paid. In face of such calamitous compensations it is hard not to be sceptical and sympathise with the authors project of presenting a more balanced view.

The British Empire is famously said to have been formed almost absentmindedly. Clearly there never was, at least not initially, a clear prospect of colonial conquest, and in fact as far as empire goes, England was a late starter. The discovery of America in 1492 clearly was a watershed in world history, and the initial beneficiaries of the extended horizons due to an extroverted Europe were Spain and Portugal, two sea-faring nations, that literally divided the world between them. The west going to Spain, the East to Portugal¹. The Spaniards subjugated the populations occupying their recently discovered territories in their search for gold and silver, while the Portugese encountered more formidable populations in the old world and restricted themselves to the spice trade. The atrocities performed, mainly by the Spanish, are well-documented, and resulted from a combination of rapacity and superior fire-power². The result was almost a total extermination of the native populations, what fire-arms could not accomplish the disease gradient finished, because by a cruel twist of history, it was the immigrants that carried with them deadly diseases to which the aboriginals had no natural immunity, and not the other way round, which would have been far more just³. The predominance of the Latin explorers lasted through the 16th century, the 17th century saw the emergence of the Netherlands as the main international trader. The explanation that this small country, recently emerging from the Spanish yoke, rose so spectacularly is explained by Ferguson due to a superior financial system based on trustworthy credit. The Dutch went to the West Indies (where

¹ This explains the anomaly in Latin America of Brazil being Portugese speaking. It simply juts out sufficiently to the east to cross a formal meridan, that was chosen as the line of demarcation by the Pope

² It is doubtful whether earlier in the history of mankind there has even been a wider gap in military technology between two civilizations.

³ Various explanations have been advocated to explain this asymmetry. One essentially points out that the denser populations centers to be found in Eurasia developed diseases to which the populations evolved immunity. Against this theory may be adduced the fact that the nomadic populations of Eurasia did not seem to suffer the same vulnerability, against which in its turn, the fact of sustained, if sporadic contact may be proposed.

they still maintain colonial remnants) where most of the economical action were, but also to South Africa, depositing the only white tribe genuinely part of Africa⁴, and the East Indies, i.e. the present Indonesia. Their spice trade with the east was conducted through the East India Company, a format soon to be emulated by the British and later by other European powers ⁵. So why did the British emerge? The beginnings of their explorations were inauspicious compared to the Dutch and not to mention the Spain and the Portugese. They were only one of many colonists on the North American mainland, outnumbered by the French, the Spanish and initially the Dutch. In fact most of the British immigrants went to the far more prosperous West Indies, where the local Indian populations had been replaced by Negro slaves, and the economy focused on the production of sugar. In fact sugar replaced spice as domestic consumption in England (and other European countries) and Ferguson supplies statistics of rapidly increasing sugar consumption in England. This points to one of the mysteries of economic development, namely what is wealth and how can it be generated by marginal consumption. Subsistence farming clearly generates nothing but at best its stable perpetuation, in all economic theory, it is the generated surplus, marginal perhaps in comparison with total production, which leads to (exponential) growth and the spinning of the economic wheels. Thus the stimulated sweet tooth of the English population set the train going. This early example has most of the ingredients of colonial ventures based on trade and exploitation. Cheap human labour was purchased in West Africa transported across the Atlantic to fuel the plantation economies, whose fruits, initially sugar, later supplemented by cotton, were transported to the mother country, the main beneficiary, where some of it was used for domestic consumption, the surplus traded for other goods, of which a tiny fraction went down to West Africa to be exchanged for slaves. Return on the investment was substantial and the wheels turned for ay least two centuries, tapping on a seemingly inexhaustible supply of humans out of Africa. The Slave trade fills us retroactively with horror, and it is seen as a crime against humanity, only to be surpassed by the extermination camps in the Second World War. Ferguson does not shirk from encountering the moral issue, how could he, but takes pride in the fact that the British pioneered the anti-slave movement, and actually from the end of the 18th century took active measures to suppress it. However, Ferguson does not digress on putting it into a proper context.

The energy needed for economic activity until the advent of the Industrial revolution has basically been based on human muscle supplemented by that of beasts. Slavery was an economic necessity in all large scale civilizations of the ancient world. Africa being no exception. Internal African wars produced slaves, a commodity, to be blunt, that interested the Europeans, thus creating an expanding market. Thus slavery was not introduced by the European, but certainly encouraged. Africa has traditionally been a sparsely populated country, due to an inhospitable geography and a punishing climate. The slave trade certainly did not help matters, but it is unclear its precise demiological consequences for the viability of the African continent. Because when it comes to large scale demiological

⁴ The white settlers along with a recent wave of Bantus from the north displaced the indigenous people, and as such should be enjoying the same historically based claim on the land as their black majority

⁵ The early predominance by the Portugese and the Dutch is still reflected in the many naval terms to be found in many European idioms originating from their languages

changes, atrocities even on the scale of genocide tend to have only marginal influence⁶ Less dramatic factors like the vagaries of weather and disease cut deeper into demio-graphic patterns. Thus a clearcut assessment of the human cost (as opposed to individual tragedy) is very hard to come at. The English change of heart, especially as not heeded by its competitors, nor by many of its own colonial descendants⁷, remains somewhat of an anamoly. One explanation brought forward by the author is that it was the consequence of determined individual action translating into politics through an early manifestation of the pressure group. Foremost among those were religious sentiment and liberal thinking among a select group of people⁸

But let us now return to the end of the 17th century when the English and the Dutch did to some extent merge, according to Ferguson, allowing the British to assume the financial 'know-how' of the Dutch, and eventually to become the dominant partner. The 18th century saw the rise of the British in competition with the French, their spheres of interests coming into collision both on the Indian subcontinent and on the northern North American. The British prevailed, and the rest, is as one says (imperial) history⁹.

It is a paradox that such a small, and by European power politics, such a marginal player, could win the worldwide quest. The traditional explanation, in no way contradicted by Ferguson, was their navy and its uncontested mastery of the seas. It is of course natural that an island nation has a large fleet and as a corollary a strong navy (as a result of diversion of production), but its beginnings in the 16th century were modest, more in the nature of pragmatic parasitism in the form of petty piracy: and the celebrated victory against the Spanish Armada, more of a stroke of providential good luck. It is an obvious fact that France, as a country, had at the time far more resources, both natural and human, than England, and thus a higher potential capacity of production. It has become fashionable to explain the rise of England (and before her that of the Dutch) due to a less authoritarian system of government and a Protestant work ethics (in fact both features are not seldom connected) which encouraged the petty activities of trade (The English being a nation of shopkeepers) and provided financial inducements to such. Ferguson is not averse to such explanations. The main fact remains, the English empire was first and foremost a commercial enterprise, buttressed by a surprisingly small military force, most of it provided by the navy¹⁰. Its objective was not to conquer territories per se, but to capture overseas markets. What it needed were points of references in the oceans, (later

⁶ The recent genocides in Ruanda seems to have had marginal demio-graphic consequences.

⁷ Clearly referring to the Southern States

⁸ The whig and conservative Burke, being one of them. In his diatribe against the French Revolution, he inveighs against the hypocrosy of the French reformers, of preserving slavery in their West Indian possessions.

⁹ The outcropping of the American colonies as independant of the motherland was initially a sideshow. The American colonies (as later on the Australians) were different from the start as they involved regular immigration as settlers disposing of indigenous populations, thus confirming to a different, ageold pattern of population flow. Of course in the end the second half of the British empire so to speak, would prove to be the dominant.

¹⁰ Orwell in his analysis of the empire stresses exactly those facts, and points especially to its lack of military muscle.

to serve as coaling stations) and trading ports. Its object was not to rule, only to make a profit. So indeed, the empire was achieved absentmindedly.

India, the center of the British imperial enterprise, a jewel in its crown, is a case in point. India never formed a natural national entity, but has always been a subcontinent home to a mosaic of races, languages and cultures, and often subjugated by nomadic powers coming from the north. At the time of the European extraversion, most of it was ruled by the declining Moghuls, invaders of Turkish roots¹¹, Islam conviction and Persian culture. For a European, even of the 18th century, the wealth and splendour of the reigning court must have been impressive, no doubt creating the concept of Asiatic opulence, and as for the lot of the common man, it probably was not much worse than back at home. All the European wanted was to trade setting up ports at Bombay¹², Madras and Calcutta with its factories¹³ asking simply for concessions. But of course one thing led to another.

But with the advent of the 19th century there came about a slow shift of attitude. While in the 18th century it is tempting to assume no sense of cultural and racial superiority on part of the Westerners. In fact the discovery of the ancient Indian cultures awed and stimulated the imaginations of scholars, and the study of Sanskrit and its similarities with European languages pointed to common roots deep into the past (and hence common destinies?). Also due to the distance from the mother country (while transatlantic voyages were measured in weeks, those to India used the unit of months, still following the path of Vasco da Gama) residencies were of a committed nature, often involving Indian wives and concubines. The 19th century gradually endowed the European with a sense of cultural and moral superiority, maybe due to the rise of Industrialism and its concomitant rise in wealth. But it is important to notice that this superiority was not initially meant to be exploited, but rather to have its gifts more equally distributed. The road to hell is as is well-known paved with good intentions, and it became imperative, as the European influence grew, to stamp out abhorrent practices, like the spectacle of thuggism¹⁴ or suttee¹⁵. The well-known historian Macaulay was a vocal proponent of such cultural mission. One should also not forget that India was a socially stratified society, dividing the population more incisively than back in Europe¹⁶. Westerners naturally identified with the higher castes, to whom primarily the fruits of its civilisations came to benefit. It created an educated class, without which the administration of those vast populations, would have been impossible, and through which the independence movement (which would of course have been the ultimate goal of the cultural missionaries) developed. The so called Sepoy mutiny of 1857 was a turning point. It was a failed attempt of revival of the old Moghul empire

¹¹ And as such reminiscent of the Imperial dynasty of the Manchurians in China, with which it was essentially contemporary

¹² Presumably of Portuguese origin as the name indicated

¹³ simply storehouses

¹⁴ Bands of killers roaming the countryside, thinking of murder as a sacred ritual

¹⁵ The tradition of burning widows along with the rest of remaining possessions on the funeral pyre of a deceased husband.

¹⁶ However one should not forget that the caste system basically was nothing but a system of division of labour, providing stability to a society by making social mobility impossible. Then of course in practice, some labours are more congenial and carry higher status than others.

and was ruthlessly put down. It was instrumental in portraying the natives as subhuman savages and cemented incipient ideas of racial superiority. Atrocities were legion, and some commentators compare the British colonialists unfavourably to the Nazis almost a century later. Ferguson has no truck with such views. He points out that the Indians themselves were divided, most of the British troops consisted of loyal natives, and that the common British soldiers protested against the excesses of their officers, something Ferguson claims never occurred with the Germans in the Second World War. The latter I think is a case of special pleading, unfounded on fact and in the nature of wishful thinking. The practical consequences of the Sepoy Mutiny was that the British Crown took over India from the commercial control of the East India Company and integrated it into its realm (symbolically by making the Queen empress of India, a flamboyant gesture characteristically conceived by Disraeli). At the same time the combined conquest and conversion of the hinterlands of Africa commenced, the key figure being Livingstone committed to the abolition of slavery (in practice turning against the Arabs), the moral and religious education of the natives, and last but not necessarily least, the opening up of the continent to trade and economic exploitation. The noteworthy thing is of course the close link between mission work and economic exploitation that appears to have been unproblematic to the Victorians. The opening up of Africa came late in the Imperial game, and the process was speeded up into a veritable scramble, in which latecomers like Germany and Belgium eagerly wanted a piece of the action. No longer a slow commercial development, but an unabashed rush of contest. The superiority of the military technology of the Europeans and the Natives were striking. The latter, albeit in numerical superior forces were literally mowed down as so much grass. As the century was coming to its end, the apogee of the imperial project was approached, although in the case of Britain, its largest extent would not be reached until after the First World War when it took over most of the German colonies. Never before in the history of mankind had there been an empire so extended, encompassing about a quarter of the earth's land surface, and basically the same portion of its population. It is inevitable that this would inspire pride of possession in almost every British schoolboy, although only a fraction of the English population at any time were actively involved in the imperial project. The sentiments that inspired the young a century ago, no doubt also inspire the author. The poet of the age was of course Kipling, whose talk about the White Man's Burden expressed the basic moral ambiguity of the whole project¹⁷. Its concluding tenure was brief, encompassing the span of a man's life, notably that of Winston Churchill one of its most fervent defenders.

In the end the empire crumbled. India was the first to gain independence¹⁸, setting the agenda, to be followed by a hoist of new nation states, especially in Africa in the sixties. But, and here Ferguson is adamant, it did not crumble because of freedom movements.

¹⁷ It is of course easy to make fun of Kipling in retrospect for his jingoism, but his intimate involvement with India, into which he was born, most likely created in him a sensitivity to the issues, absent in more detached liberal detractors.

¹⁸ Among the colonial possessions should also be included the Irish, a fact not appreciated. The question of Home Rule that agonized the British authorities during the latter part of the 19th century, can be seen a precursor to independence movement overseas. In fact the resolution after the First World War did have consequences on Indian ambitions.

The greatest challenge to the empire was not from within but from without, namely the rise of rival powers, each of them surely worse than the British, be it the Russian (whose gradual annexion of its vast eastern extent was nothing but a colonialization by contiguous territory), the Japanese not to mention the Germans, who pioneered, as some Swedish writers contend, colonial practices on European soil. By comparison to those the British Empire appears almost benign. The message is clear. The world under British dominion was lucky, any other power would have been far worse¹⁹.

The basic questions of any colonial venture should be. 1) Who benefited and 2) who were exploited and finally to try to make the answers quantitatively meaningful. The answers to the first questions are of course foregone, but to make the answers relevant, they need to be in some measure quantified. This is of course not easy, comparing the incommensurable is by definition impossible, yet some detached views are called for. It is a fact that the prosperity of the British population rose quicker than that of the Indian, although the latter, according to the figures provided by Ferguson, did experience a slow but steady improvement under British rule. A reasonable assumption is that for the great majority of people, imperialism had very little direct effect. Most people in Britain did not directly enjoy the fruits of imperial rule, their gradual material improvement being a consequence of industrialism. In the same way, Ferguson argues, the lot of the common Indian would probably have not been better under prolonged Mughal rule instead. Against this the Marxist historian Hobsbawm claims that the British dismantled a burgeoning industrialization of India, referring to its incipient cotton industry, and instead had it revert back to a dominant agricultural economy. To pursue this further we end up in contrafactual speculation, which of course will easily lead to hypothetical figures of plunder, initially referred to. According to Ferguson only a thin section of the population benefitted substantially from colonial adventure, although much of it also trickled down to the middle classes. And of course any British who took up residence in the colonies automatically enjoyed the perogatives of an elite with hordes of servants. This in retrospect explains the nostalgia for the pleasures of the Raj. As far as Africa the exploitation of the natives clearly offset the plunder extracted. Africa simply was not such a commercially viable prospect as earlier colonies. But running colonies also involved expenses, among which the laying down of infrastructure counted for the most. The Indian subcontinent was criss-crossed by railways, supplied with institutions and buildings to house them. In the words of many imperialists, the ultimate project was the spread of civilization. This is a thorny issue, but the fact remains that apart from the veneer of culture, human culture involves science as well as its applications, development that in some sense transcends culture and whose fruits should not be withheld. This also involves a steep gradient. The west has much to offer, even if it is only superior military technology which is just a symptom of a wider technological advantage; while the east has little to match. Thus the flow of ideas and cultural traits tends to be very asymmetrical which has a degenerating effect on those on the receiving end. With few exceptions post-colonial developments have been rather

¹⁹ The example of the Japanese conquest of South East Asia and the way they mistreated their British prisoners of war is presented in an embarrassingly maudlin way. The Japanese are described by the author as subhuman having the absurd temerity to treat their taller charges with such contempt, after all those were British after all. It is not clear whether the irony of the racists undertones is visible to the author

disappointing, something in later years obscured by some spectacular economic revitalizations²⁰. It is argued that the British educated the Indians well in matters of civil society and democracy, on the other hand, the experiences of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma belie this facile conclusion. Subsaharian Africa is generally believed to be a disaster, either showing the long range insidious effects of colonialism (and post-colonial treatment), or that those nations are simply not fit to rule themselves.

The British empire collapsed because Britain no longer had the economic muscle to maintain it. This is Fergusons verdict. The two world wars broke its back, and its dissolution, eagerly masterminded by the Americans, was inevitable. But Churchill resisted the shameful suggestions of Hitler to have its empire saved on the condition that he was given a free hand in Europe. (A suggestion, Ferguson notes, was inspite of almost obsequious flattering rhetorics fundamentally insincere.) But the Empire saved England he concludes, although it is not clear exactly how.

But the age of empire is not over, Ferguson argues in his concluding chapter, the same sentiments and ambitions are still present, only marginally differently phrased. The new colonialization is globalization, whose universal benefits of free trade, market economies, are sung by prevalent economic opinion. The empire is of course the American, which prefers to make its dominance not formal. Thus, Ferguson seems to argue, the Imperial project did in the end triumph, leading into completion the original globalization project of the British, which was disrupted by two world wars. Those ideas are not particular original whether or not one agrees with the sentiments and the conclusions.

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²⁰ One thinks of so called tiger economies of Asia. But most of their most succesful members like Korea, Taiwan and Thailand were never part of the Empire.