



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on December 17, 2013

Was Colonialism a Positive Force?

It's hard to forget meeting a man who hated Mahatma Gandhi. I once did, though. No, he wasn't some erstwhile viceroy lamenting lost glory days, but an Indian born and raised in the land of sati and saris. The reason for his ire? He said that when Gandhi drove the British out, India lost everything: technicians, engineers, expertise, bureaucratic integrity, etc. In the same vein, I have a Zambian friend who has argued that colonialism had a positive impact, in that it brought civilization to the lands — such as his — it touched.



And, in fact, even that Kenyan Obama agrees. The president's half-brother George Obama, that is. He once [told](#) social commentator Dinesh D'Souza that it would have been better "if the whites had stayed longer" in Kenya, as their premature expulsion caused his nation to descend into poverty.

But what of the conventional narrative that colonialism is responsible for Third World poverty? Economist Dr. Walter Williams addressed this in 2011, [writing](#):

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It turns out that countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were colonies; yet they are among the world's richest countries. Hong Kong was a colony of Great Britain until 1997, when China regained sovereignty, but it managed to become the second richest political jurisdiction in the Far East. On the other hand, Ethiopia, Liberia, Tibet, and Nepal were never colonies, or were so for only a few years, and they rank among the world's poorest and most backward countries.

Despite the many justified criticisms of colonialism and, I might add, multinationals, both served as a means of transferring Western technology and institutions, bringing backward peoples into greater contact with a more-developed Western world. A tragic fact is that many African countries have suffered significant decline since independence. In many of those countries the average citizen can boast that he ate more regularly and enjoyed greater human-rights protections under colonial rule. The colonial powers never perpetrated the unspeakable human rights abuses, including genocide, that we have seen in post-independence Burundi, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Central African Empire, Somalia, and elsewhere.

Ah, colonialism cast as nation building. Such a characterization can hit a nerve because many see colonialism as a phenomenon whereby white Western powers dominated hapless "minority" nations, but this is an ahistorical view. Consider Britain, thought the quintessence of colonial powers. At one time it was, along with most of Western Europe, a colony of sorts itself — of the Romans.

And, no doubt, this inspired many of the same complaints from some early-first-millennium Europeans that we had heard more recently from colonized Third Worlders: The colonizers were trampling their culture.



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They were imposing their values.

They were foreign interlopers.

Yet the Romans brought more advanced technology and higher culture to Britain; they built aqueducts, bathhouses, and amphitheaters. The average Briton's life arguably was better under Roman rule than it had ever been before. And when the last Roman troops had to leave Britain in 410 A.D. to defend Italy, it's said that their departure was lamented by no small number of natives.

However the Romans' exit was viewed, the results of their entrance are fairly clear. The fact is that no great civilization develops in isolation; in accordance with the "two heads are better than one" principle, peoples can maximize their knowledge only when they learn from one another, and this can happen only if they actually have contact. As economist Dr. Thomas Sowell [wrote](#) in "Race, culture and equality":

When the British first crossed the Atlantic and confronted the Iroquois on the eastern seaboard of what is today the United States, they were able to steer across that ocean in the first place because they used rudders invented in China, they could navigate on the open seas with the help of trigonometry invented in Egypt, their calculations were done with numbers invented in India, and their general knowledge was preserved in letters invented by the Romans.

And when two cultures do have contact, it's the less advanced that can learn more. Yet since it can also be dominated more, this sometimes comes at the cost of colonization.

Note that this isn't an argument justifying colonization. In fact, it's much as with a fellow I knew who'd been hit by a truck but said that dealing with his infirmities had made him a better man. He certainly wasn't implying that getting hit by trucks was a good thing, but his experience illuminated a truth: Even something bad in principle can have good outcomes in the particular.

The fact is that colonization was part of the inter-group-interaction phenomenon that spread civilization; the Romans learned from the Greeks' triumphs and built upon them, and then brought this knowledge to the lands they conquered, such as England, France, and Spain. In turn, those nations built further, became colonial powers and carried the treasures (and trials) of civilization to what we now call the Third World.

Another common misconception is that colonialism robbed people of freedom. But whether it was pre-Roman Britain; or pre-colonial Africa, South or Central America, Mexico, or Asia, the peoples were governed by monarchs of some kind. The only difference upon being colonized was that one unelected government was replaced with another — one that was often better.

It wasn't just the technology offered by colonial powers, either, but also more "advanced" morality. For example, just as the Romans came to outlaw human sacrifice in their conquered lands, so did the Spanish eliminate the human sacrifice so rampant among the Aztecs. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British eventually outlawed sati (widow burning) in areas of India they controlled. And it was colonial powers that ultimately ended slavery (where they could) in Africa.

As for freedom, insofar as representative government has taken hold in former colonies — such as India, Kenya, and Botswana — is it conceivable that it could have happened without Western influence? Democracy is a Western invention.

The international language of business is English. In China and Japan, people wear suits and ties, and the whole world wants the Western lifestyle, with its cars, computers, refrigerators, advanced medicine



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and science, and other wonders of modernity. Of course, it won't always be this way. If man still walks the Earth in 2,000 years, the colonizers and colonized may be different, but the story would still be the same. Man's domination of man would be continuing, and many would complain about it, as the legacy of civilization was passed on as it had always been.



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