# Questioning Decolonization

## Framing essay

## What was colonialism?: Five Takes

**What was colonialism?**

In the next three lessons of this unit, we will explore *how* colonialism ends. Using primary sources, we will specifically try to understand why most of the world’s colonies became independent in a relatively short time in the mid-20th century. Then, using secondary sources, we will explore the question of what was really ‘decolonized in this period, and what work remains to be done. In this lesson, however, we will be revisiting colonialism itself.

**Colonialism Revisited**

Until the mid-20th century, the modern world was a world of both formal nation-states and formal empires. One of these has survived the passage of time. The political structure of the world, today, is composed of nation-states. Almost every person on the face of the planet is a citizen of a nation-state, and almost every bit of land is claimed by one. But as recently as the early 1940s, nation-states and citizens co-existed with empire. About half the people in the world were not citizens of a nation-state, but rather subjects of an empire, with substantially fewer rights. Often, nation-states and empires were tied together. For example, France, Britain, and Japan were all nation-states. Their inhabitants were citizens. But they were all also the ruling states of vast empires, and in the case of France and Britain, at least, their colonial subjects outnumbered their citizens.

Hopefully, you will have previously studied the basics of empires, imperialism, and colonialism. The colonies of the early 20th century had grown over many years and centuries. Some dated back as far as the early modern era. Others, in particular the British Empire’s colonies in South Asia, the Americas, and Oceana (Australia and New Zealand), had formed in the eighteenth century. But most colonies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific had been conquered violently in a competitive rush at the end of the nineteenth century.

If we wanted to get really complex, we could distinguish between three types of colonialism. We could talk about settler colonies, in which large groups of citizens actually settled in the colonies. We could talk about informal colonialism, where a state exerted influence over another state, but didn’t actually claim it. But we’re going to focus more on the third, most prevalent type of colonialism – where a state claimed authority over another state or people, but without large-scale migration of citizens. We are going to study this kind of colonialism in particular because it is central to both the events of the mid-20th century and the long process of eliminating the legacy of empire worldwide.

To do that, I am going to explain colonialism in five ways. Keep these five different windows on colonialism in mind throughout the unit, because we will be asking when and how (and if!) each of these aspects of colonialism has come to an end.

* Authority: sovereignty and the colonial state
* Control: Indirect rule
* Economics: Exploitation
* Ideology: Hierarchy and Difference
* Doctrine: Civilizing Mission

**A few parameters before we begin**

Before we really begin to dig into these five windows, however, I want to raise a few points for you to consider. I have chosen the parameters for this discussion of colonialism, and I have been pretty specific in those choices. I am talking about empires in the period of the long nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose colonies became independent between about 1948 and the 1990s. I am mostly focused on colonies under the rule of industrialized empires, mostly European countries and Japan and the United States. This means I have chosen not to focus on:

Colonies in previous periods – in particular, I could have you look at colonies like the British North American colonies that achieved ‘decolonization’ and became independent states in the 18th centuries.

Non-European empires – even during the period on which I focus, we could look at areas ruled by states like China and the Ottoman Empire, whose empires looked somewhat different from the ones we are studying.

Arguably, these are examples that would be interesting to compare to the empires that *are* featured in this study, and you may wish to discuss them with your instructor. However, I chose not to focus on them as much because they perhaps aren’t as central to the question of whether decolonization really happened, the question that drives this module.

**Authority: sovereignty and the colonial state**

Okay, now lets talk about our first window into colonialism.

Fundamentally, colonialism was a claim to *sovereignty* – the legal right to govern and to enforce rules. This claim was made by an imperial state – the *metropole*. The metropole assumed sovereignty over a colony, and in turn *granted its authority to a governor* whom it appointed and sent out to the colony, a decision made without local representation. This kind of authority was known to the Romans as *imperium*, and is the basis of our modern words imperialism and empire.

The claim to sovereignty this was based partly in the principle of *terra nullis* – the argument that the colonial territory had been stateless prior to acquisition – and partly on the argument that its population was incompetent for self-rule. We’ll get to that second part later. But we can start by saying that the claim to *terra nullis* was, of course, incorrect. People already lived in these areas, and they had political systems of their own. But these were largely disregarded or ignored by the imperial powers.

**Control: Indirect rule**

But claiming ‘sovereignty’ and making lines on a map is all very well. The next question is how colonial administrations actually *exerted authority* over – and hence ruled – the colonial territories and populations they acquired.

There has frequently been a lot of back and forth discussion about *different styles of colonial* rule – what the French did, how the Belgians ruled, what was the British model. However, the fact is that most of those differences belong to early periods of the modern imperial age. By the 1920s, at least, most every imperial state practiced (by-and-large) the same model of colonial rule. We call this model **‘indirect rule’**.

The indirect rule model recognized three ***realities***:

1. The colonizing powers could never mobilize, for long periods of time, enough people and money to effectively govern much larger populations and vast territories.
2. As a corollary -- Colonies had to be profitable, and armies of administrators and soldiers (especially European men), cost too much to keep in the field.
3. The colonial administrations, despite their claims, never really understood or were trusted by those whom they ruled.

The result was ***indirect rule*** – a strategy by which a *small number* of well-paid Europeans managed – and paid – a *larger body* of less-well-paid Africa, Asian, or Pacific Island officials, sergeants, sub-alterns, clerks, and chiefs to do the day to day work of managing the colony. Except where there were very high numbers of settlers ( a pretty rare situation), indirect rule was ubiquitous.

Indirect rule worked only because it was accompanied by the strategy of *divide-and-conquer*. Within the colonies, the imperial powers implemented *two strategies* to divide people.

The first was a hierarchy of race --- Europeans were at the top, local people were at the bottom, but usually there was a class in the middle. In Africa and the Caribbean, many of these were Indians (in the British Empire) or Lebanese (in the French Empire). These groups in the middle were encouraged to believe that only by supporting the colonial administration could they keep their relative privilege.

The second was a taxonomy of ethnicity – dividing different communities in the territory by ethnicity or religion and appointing separate locals as chiefs, princes, or Sultans over each of them… and then encouraging them to compete with each other for privileges, land, or jobs.



In this way, colonialism encouraged a kind of ‘tribalism’ – a *separation of people from each other* so that they wouldn’t cooperate with each other to overthrow the imperial rulers.

As we will see, one of the *big jobs of decolonizers* was going to be to figure out how to unite these groups that had been so effectively separated.

**Economics: exploitation**

As stated above, indirect rule was partly an **economic** decision, and one underpinned by a particular type of *economics of extraction and exploitation*. Simply put, colonial economics were oriented to provide a *positive profit ratio* for capitalist metropolitan economies, and a cost to colonial subjects.

This often worked. Indian economist ***Utsa Patnaik*** has recently calculated what she believes was the cost of colonialism to India – and proposes the number $***45 trillion***, all to the benefit of the British economy. Such economic advantages accrued in four ways:

1. The imperial power could extract resources from the colony, often at a cheaper rate than back home. Also, often colonies had resources that the imperial power did not possess. The tiny state of Belgium, for example, had few natural resources. Its African colony, Congo, by contrast, had vast mineral deposits and enormous wealth in rubber and other plant materials.
2. The imperial power could get its colonial subjects to work for relatively little money. In fact, they often used forced labor on both government projects and commercial endeavors. Often, this forced labor was carried out very violently.
3. The companies of the imperial power often had a monopoly on selling finished products in the colonies.
4. Investors in the imperial power could often invest in projects in the colonies and get a high rate of return.

These four advantages explain why wealth flowed from colonies to metropole.

**Ideology: Hierarchy and Difference**

The claiming of sovereignty and the imposition of an exploitative economic system was justified by an ideology that claimed that the citizens of the metropole were superior to colonial subjects.

This ideology was characterized by three principal ideas.

1. First, that the world is divided into races or ethnicities, that these ethnicities are *sortable*, and that they each have national characteristics that suit them to different positions in society.
2. Second, that mixing of these groups in any way is bad – including bad for the stability of the colony and the colonizers ability to rule. Instead, they should be segregated as much as possible.
3. Finally, that the national characteristics of colonial subjects render them unsuitable to goven – that they are irrational, childlike, or there is something fundamentally wrong with them. These ideas, of course, justified denying colonial subjects rights, including the right to rule themselves.

**Doctrine**: **The Civilizing Mission**

Ironically, this hierarchy could then be expressed not only in the language of domination, but also through an ideology of ‘civilizing’: that the colonial administration was ruling and exploiting the subjects for their own good – in order to benefit and civilize them.

This was expressed fundamentally through the *gendered language of paternalism* – or fatherhood: That the colonizers were as ‘fathers’ to the colonial subject ‘children. In the language of the era, this meant they:

* Taught them
* Punished them
* And kept them from temptation

Imperial powers thought of themselves as being fathers, in these ways, to their colonial subjects.

**Conclusion: What is ‘decolonization’**

If these five features all characterized colonialism, then decolonization – the removal or end of colonialism through an event or a process – should also end all of these features.

Did the large numbers of ‘decolonization’ events – the independence of many colonies – between 1945 and 1975 actually end all of these things? That is a question we will explore in this unit.