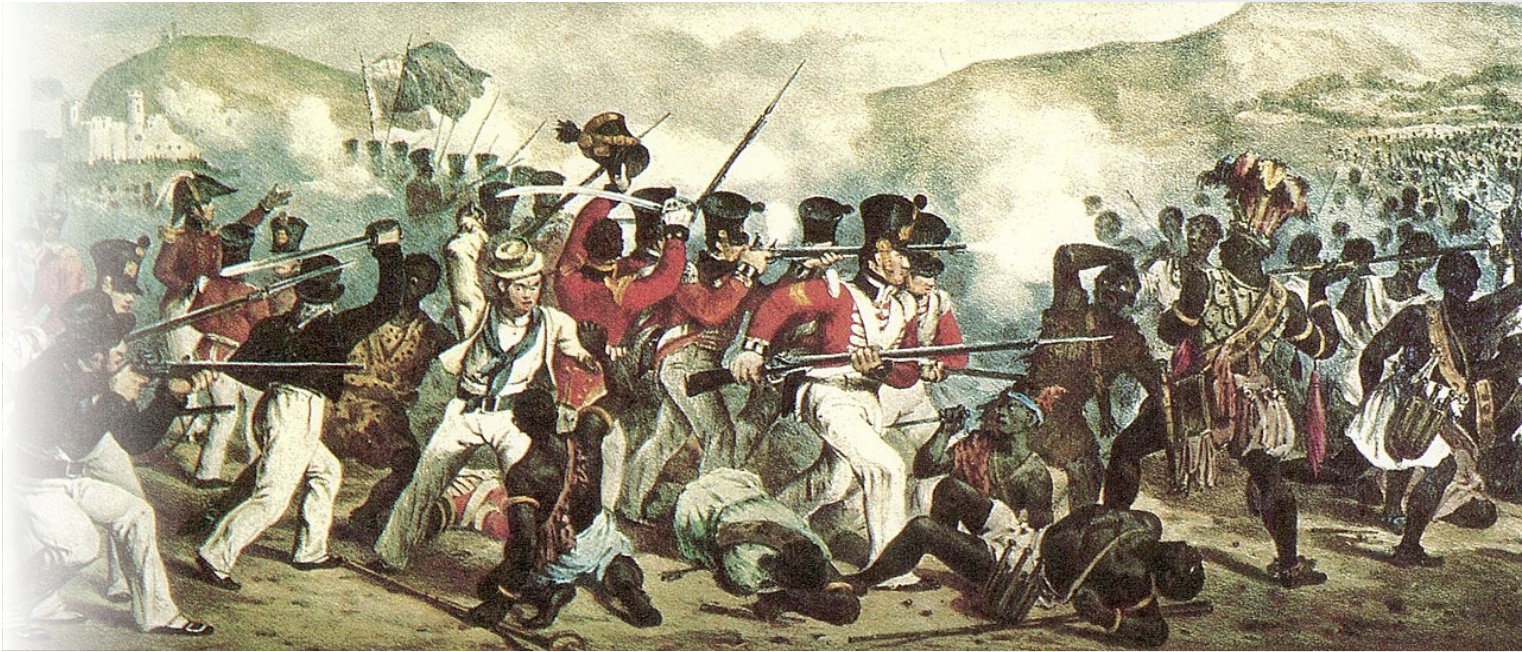


What was Colonialism?: Five Takes



This module focuses on the events and processes of decolonization from 1945 to the present. However, in order to fully understand decolonization as both an 'event' and a 'process', it can be helpful to begin by defining exactly what colonialism was and how it functioned.

In this reading, we will examine colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the imperial reach of countries including Britain, France, Japan, and the US stretched to regions including Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, and around half of the world's population were colonial subjects.

How did colonizers claim and exert power over such vast territories? How did they reshape societies and justify colonization? And what were their goals? Exploring these questions can help us to define some of the central elements of colonialism and understand its impact on societies. It will also prepare us to more critically consider what decolonization might mean in future lessons.

WHAT WAS COLONIALISM?

COLONIALISM REVISITED

CLAIMING AUTHORITY

EXERTING AUTHORITY

DIVIDING UP THE COLONIZED

JUSTIFYING AUTHORITY

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

CONCLUSION

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.

Perhaps in this class, or perhaps at an earlier time in your life, you have previously studied some 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 Oceania (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.

Key Terms:

Colonialism

Sovereignty

Metropole

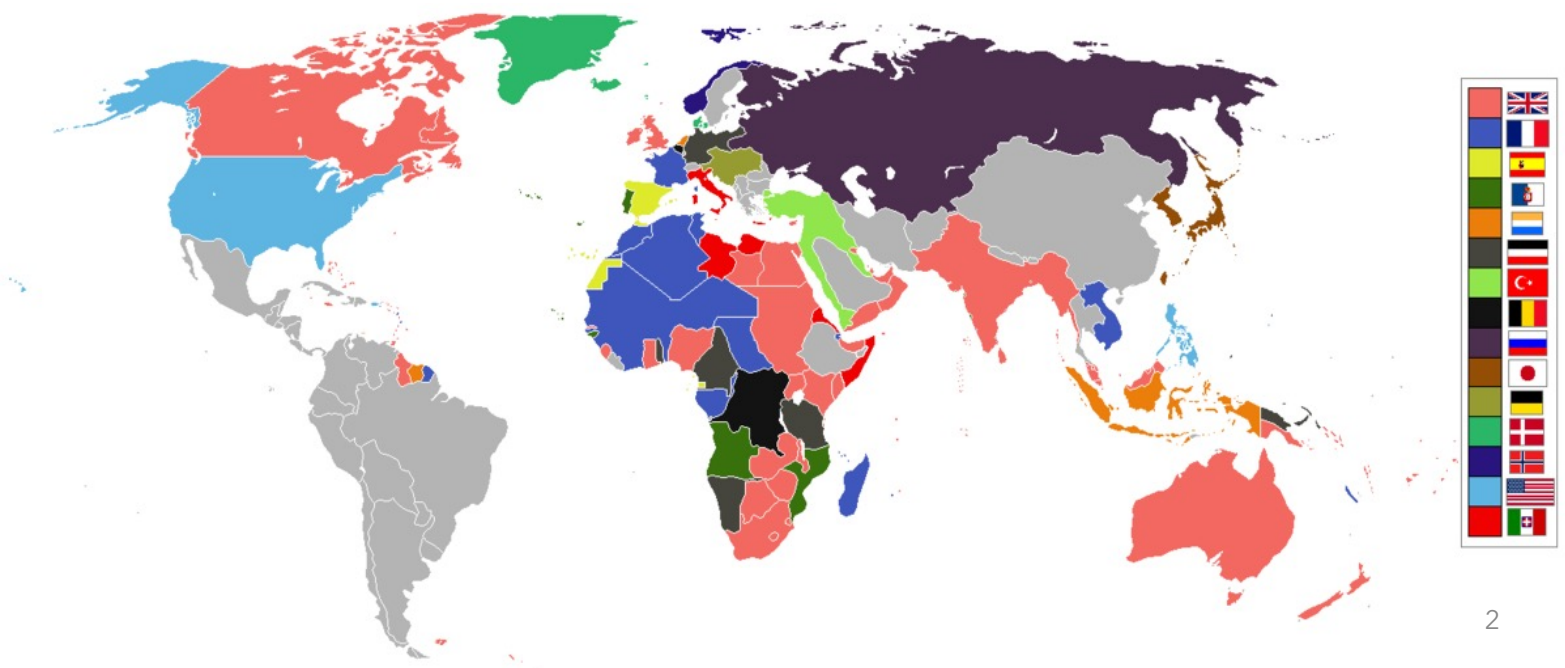
Imperialism

Terra nullis

Indirect rule

Paternalism

Extent of global empires, 1914



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 moved to and settled in the colonies. Or, we could talk about informal colonialism, where a state exerted influence over another state, but didn't actually claim it. However, 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.



Map depicting the extent of the British empire in 1866

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. It is this type of colonialism that also characterized most of the colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In such cases, the borders of colonies were created largely by the colonizers and did not necessarily match the ethnic or linguistic groupings that already existed. They also included multiple preexisting ethnic or political groups of people, some of whom had preexisting relationships to one another. Usually, the colonizers adapted those preexisting political and ethnic associations to the needs of their new colonial state, often in ways that created dependencies and tensions among the colonized peoples.



Did you know?

In 1884-5, European leaders met at the Congress of Berlin, where they partitioned Africa into colonies. They drew these borders without input from local rulers or communities.

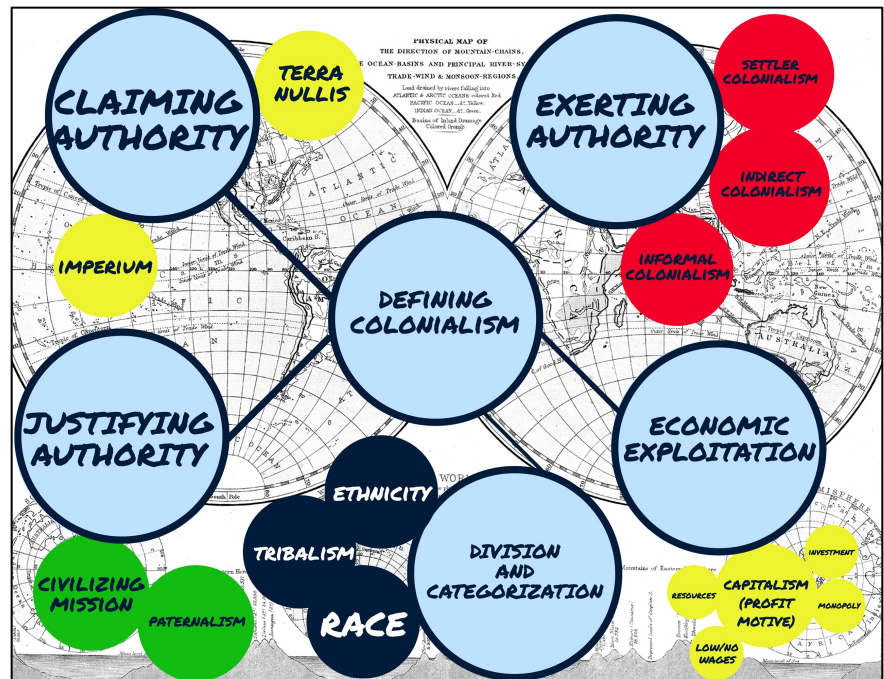
[The Partition of Africa](#)

Anton von Werner, Congress of Berlin, 1881.



We can understand how colonialism functioned, as well as the ways it impacted societies by looking at it in five takes, or frames. Keep these five different perspectives 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.

- Claiming Authority
- Exerting Authority
- Dividing up the Colonized
- Justifying Authority
- Economic Exploitation



Before we begin to dig into these five windows, however, I want to raise a few points for you to consider. First, we are discussing empires in the period of the long nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose colonies became independent between about 1945 and 1975. We are also focused on colonies under the rule of industrialized empires, mostly European countries, Japan, and the United States. This means we are not focusing on colonies in previous periods – like the British North American colonies that achieved ‘decolonization’ and became independent states in the 18th century, or the Spanish colonies in the Americas that gained independence mostly through the early 19th century. We are also not considering the empires of states such as China or Russia, or the Ottoman Empire, which looked somewhat different from the ones we are studying. It might be interesting to compare these other kinds of empire to the kinds that *are* featured in this module. Such comparisons can often produce important insights, and you may choose to have that conversation in class or to explore more on your own! However, focusing on these empires and the ways colonization functioned in them will help us to answer the central question that drives this module – whether decolonization really happened.

Okay, now let’s talk about our first window into colonialism...

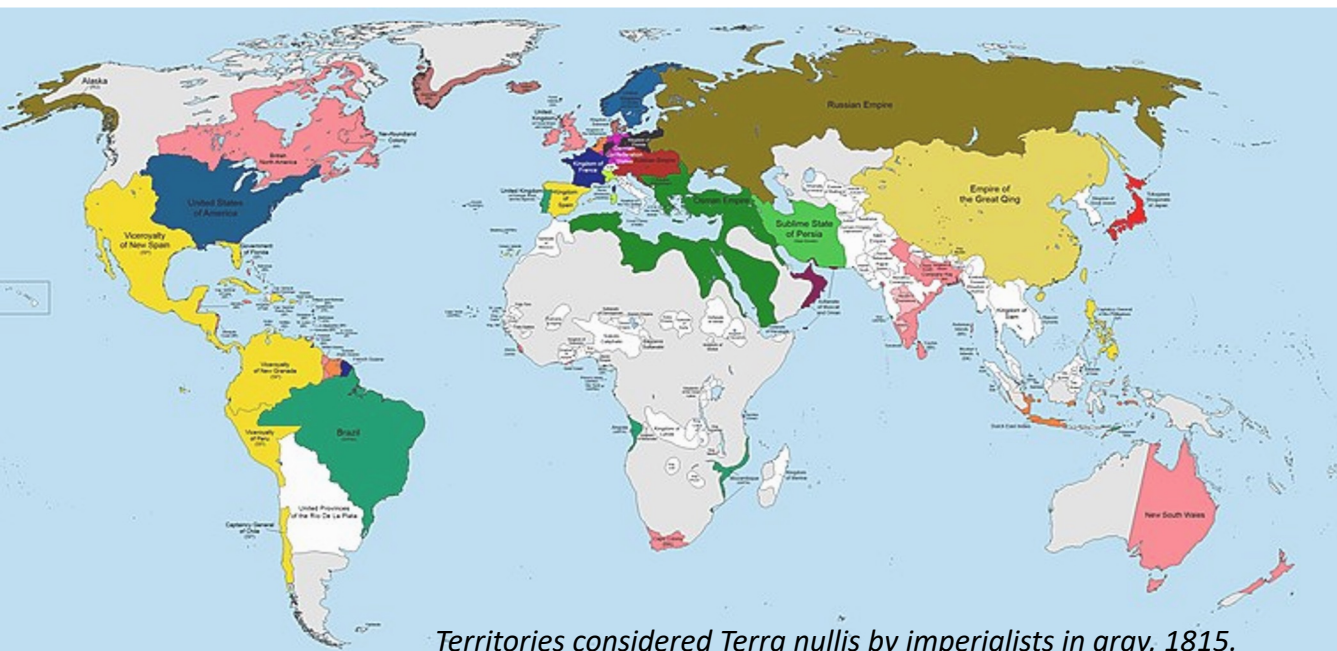


Claiming Authority: Sovereignty and the Colonial State

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 Rhodes Colossus': Caricature of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes from Punch Magazine, 1892.

The claim to sovereignty 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.



Territories considered *Terra nullis* by imperialists in gray, 1815.

Exerting Authority: 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 been a lot of back-and-forth discussion among historians about different styles of colonial rule – what the French did, how the Belgians ruled, or what the British model was. However, the fact is that most of the differences historians debate belong to earlier 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.'**



British governor of the Gold Coast (contemporary Ghana), greets Chiefs of the Northern Territories, 1953

Indirect rule was born of a recognition of three fundamental 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) Colonies were expected to be profitable, and armies of administrators and soldiers (especially European men), cost too much to keep in the field.
- 3) Colonial administrations, despite their claims, never really understood or were trusted by those whom they ruled

As a model of colonialism, indirect rule aimed to address these issues by employing a strategy in 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, soldiers, 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.

A meeting of the Chamber of Princes (Narendra Mandal) of the British Raj, 1941





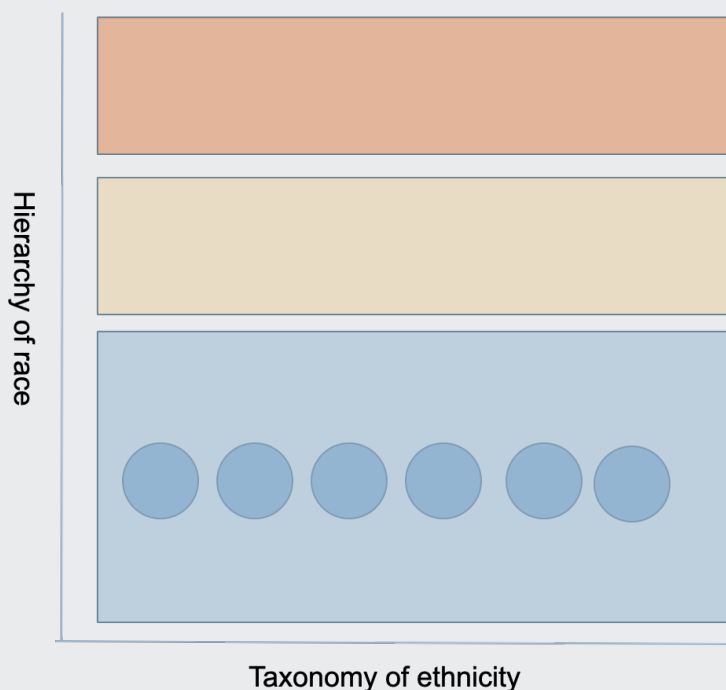
Indian servants in the British Raj, 19th c

Dividing up the Colonized: Race and Ethnicity

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...

This divide-and-conquer strategy rested on certain set of ways of thinking about the world. First, that human beings can be divided into races, that these groups are *sortable*, and that they each have national characteristics that suit them to different positions in society. This way of thinking does not understand races as equal. The categories themselves were treated as hierarchy. Europeans (and people of European descent) were at the top. Local people were at the bottom.

Meanwhile, there usually there was a class in the middle, sometimes migrants from somewhere else that was not Europe, or ethnic, racial, or religious minorities whom the colonizers provided some privileges over the majority local population, but never treated as equal to themselves. In British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, many of these middle groups were migrants from India (which was also a part of the British Empire). In French colonies in Africa, they were often migrants from French-ruled Lebanon. These groups in the middle were encouraged to believe that only by supporting the colonial administration could they keep their privilege relative to the majority at the bottom of the hierarchy.



This graphic illustrates the hierarchies of race in colonialism, and division of colonial subjects. The red represents European imperial rulers; the yellow classes of colonial subjects given some privileges, though not treated as equals to imperialists; and the blue ethnic or other divisions within the larger population of colonial subjects.

This way of thinking assumed that any mixing of these groups is bad – including bad for the stability of the colony and the colonizers’ ability to rule. Instead, people of different categories should be segregated as much as possible. This included where they lived, what kinds of education they received (and even what languages they learned), what kinds of jobs they could hold, and who they could socialize with.



South Asian workers
prepare rice in Jamaica, 1895

Finally, this way of thinking assumed that the nature characteristics of colonial subjects render them unsuitable to govern – 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. 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.

The second way imperial rulers divided people was through 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 ‘tribalism’ – a *separation of people from each other* so that they wouldn’t cooperate with each other to overthrow the imperial rulers.



Engraving by William Blake, *Europe supported by Africa and America*, 1796.

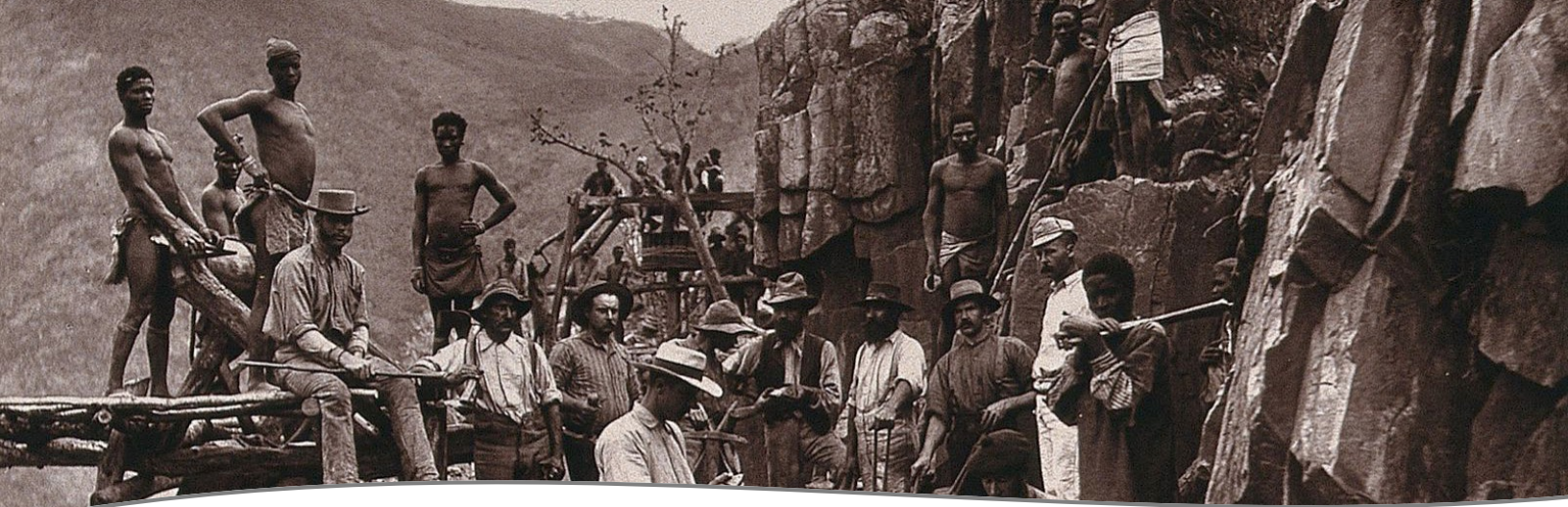
Justifying Authority: The Civilizing Mission

Claiming of sovereignty in a situation of colonial rule was also justified by an ideology that claimed that the citizens of the metropole were superior to colonial subjects. Ironically, this hierarchy could then be expressed not only in the language of domination (associated with race and ethnic hierarchies), but also through an ideology of ‘civilizing:’ that the colonial administration was ruling and exploiting the subjects for their own good – to benefit and to ‘civilize’ them.

This justification 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

In these ways, imperial powers thought of themselves as caring fathers to their colonial subjects.



Miners of the Republic Gold Mining Company, South Africa, 1888.

Economic Exploitation

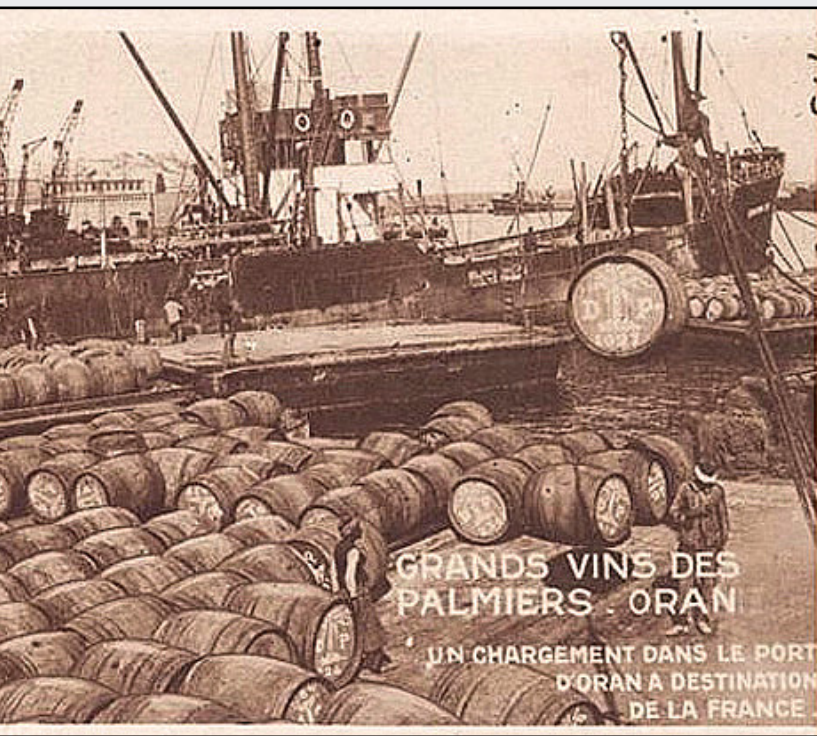
As stated above, indirect rule was partly an economic decision, and one underpinned by a particular type of economics of extraction and exploitation. Simply put, colonial economics were oriented to provide a *positive profit ratio* for capitalist metropolitan economies, and a cost to colonial subjects.

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.



Moorish women making carpets in French Algeria, 1899



Postcard showing a shipment of wine departing from Oran, Algeria to France, 1910

- 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.

Conclusion

The elements outlined in this reading - claiming authority, exerting authority, dividing up the colonized, justifying authority, and economic exploitation - provide us with 'five takes' that can help us to better understand how colonialism functioned and its impact on societies.

Yet, 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. What might that transformation look like? And did the large numbers of 'decolonization' events - the independence of many colonies - between 1945 and 1990 actually end all of these things?

These are the questions we will continue to explore in this unit.



A 1906 cartoon from a German cultural magazine, *Simplicissimus*, critiquing colonialism and suggesting a variety of reasons for colonial violence.

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World empires and colonies in 1914, just before the First World War, CC: BY SA, Andrew0921 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:World_1914_empires_colonies_territory.PNG

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Elements of indirect rule, by Clif Stratton

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Page 6:

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Indian servant washes the feet of the British master, XIXth century, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_Empire.jpg
Hierarchy of race and ethnicity, by Trevor's Getz

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South Asian workers preparing rice in Jamaica, 1895, Gale [Nineteenth Century Collections Online](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/BKODEX729882137/GDCS?u=gale&sid=GDCS&xid=e4e2ca4c&pg=10), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/BKODEX729882137/GDCS?u=gale&sid=GDCS&xid=e4e2ca4c&pg=10>
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