

1. INTRODUCTION

by

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In a sense, cities were superfluous to the purposes of colonists. The Europeans who founded empires outside their own continent were primarily concerned with extracting those products which they could not acquire within Europe. These goods were largely agricultural, and grown most often in a climate not found within Europe. Even when, as in India before 1800, the major exports were manufactures, in general they were still made in the countryside rather than in the great cities. It was only on rare occasion when great mineral wealth was discovered that giant metropolises grew up around the site of extraction. Since their location was determined by geology, not economics, they might be in the most inaccessible and inconvenient areas, but they too would draw labour off from the agricultural pursuits of the colony as a whole. From the point of view of the colonists, the cities were therefore in some respects necessary evils, as they were parasites on the rural producers, competing with the colonists in the process of surplus extraction.

Nevertheless, the colonists could not do without cities. The requirements of colonisation demanded many unequivocally urban functions. Pre-eminent among these was of course the need for a port, to allow the export of colonial wares and the import of goods from Europe, or from other parts of the non-European world, in the country-trade as it was known around India. This trade naturally also entailed the various services associated with it, for example finance and insurance. Then, as the colonies became established, governmental centres and garrisons became necessary, and these in their turn could only increase the density of urban life, as numerous suppliers, retailers and craftsmen arrived to service such institutions. In the twentieth century, too, many of the colonial cities began to acquire Western-style industrial establishments, as part of a process that has turned many former colonial capitals – Jakarta, Calcutta, Mexico City – into some of the largest and fastest growing urban agglomerations in the world.

Colonies, then, required modern towns. Perhaps this can best be seen by examining the counter-examples, of which the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana) is the most salient. Until just before independence it had no cities. Even the territory's administration was conducted from outside its borders. Despite a strong tradition of indigenous urbanisation – the major centres had populations of well over ten thousand – the modern city did not take root there. But this is in itself merely a symptom of the Protectorate's status as a sub-colony of South Africa, and as part of the hinterland of the gold mining conurbations of the Transvaal, for which it provided labour. Not even the most rudimentary urban network was required to fulfill this function, and since no other conurbations worth speaking of developed until after independence, neither did an urban network.

This is clearly the most extreme case, a case in which the absence of anything like a city in the modern sense became the salient feature of the country's settlement pattern. Nevertheless, it demonstrates just how indicative the study of urban systems can be for the colonial historian. An analysis of the city life of a colony is generally a most valuable approach for the study of its history, and above all of the transformations consequent upon the processes of colonial rule. If we can understand its cities, we can understand much of the dynamism of a given country's history, in a way that complements the understanding gained from a study of the countryside. This is not only because in the course of the colonial period an increasingly large proportion of the population of the Third World came to live in towns and cities, although in many cases this was overshadowed by the explosive growth that has occurred since independence. It is also the case that much of what was creative and destructive in the dialectical relationship between colonial rulers and their subjects originated in the towns.

To study a city, above all in the colonial world, then, is at the same time to study the society in which it is situated. It is not just that the cities are part of colonial society, and as such are inextricably linked to all other parts of it. Rather they did much to determine the very nature of society. Unwanted as they were, they were the very essence of colonial life. Moreover many of the major tensions of the relations imposed by colonialism came to a head there. To study a city's life therefore is to gain a privileged insight into the life of the colony in which it was found. And in the contrasts between cities, and in their similarities, much can be learnt of the distinctions between different colonial systems as they were developed through time. This is particularly the case with regard to the great port cities that have so often become the megalopolises of the modern world.

It is no coincidence, then, that all the cities discussed in detail in this book are ports, with the exception of those Central American towns Van Oss describes. And the reason why the large towns of Central America were not ports is clear. Van Oss argues convincingly that the Spanish were intent on re-creating a world as congruent as possible with that of the Iberian peninsula. That world was relatively highly urbanised, but it was not oriented towards Europe. There were no major

port towns at all on the Caribbean coast of the isthmus. It might be argued that colonial society was created for the benefit of those Spaniards who came to live there, but not for the benefit of Spain, which looked rather to the silver mines of the Andes. This unusual variant of the colonial process, this level of autarky, is very clearly illustrated in the structure of the urban network there. The towns exploited the peasants, but this did not mean that they were links in a chain which ran back to the colonial mother country.

Nevertheless, it should be evident that those colonies without substantial, semi-modern cities to form a link in the process of colonial exploitation for the benefit of Europe were unusual. Seventeenth century Central America, where the towns turned their backs on Europe, or the twentieth century Bechuanaland Protectorate, without modern towns, were clear exceptions. In the great majority of cases, the primate cities gained their prominence from their intermediary position between the colonised society and the colonial metropolis. They gained their primacy in part because of favourable location and in part because of the colonisers' drive for monopoly and control; they were maintained as economies of scale in transportation and the necessity of establishing a government apparatus in one place encouraged still greater concentration. A selection of these cities is described in the core chapters of this book. Thus, Oosterhoff analyses the rapid growth and equally rapid fall of Zeelandia, the centre of the short-lived Dutch colonial settlement on Taiwan. In many ways, the history of this town condensed the normal colonial history, lasting several centuries, into four decades, as within that period the town grew from nothing to a size too great for the Europeans to control, so that they were expelled by a 'nationalist' movement of the Chinese.

The consequence of this short period of colonial domination, however, was that Zeelandia never grew to be a city of world prominence. In contrast, the following two chapters describe cities that have become veritable megalopolises, even though, like Zeelandia, they were founded to serve as the headquarters of European commercial companies. The two chapters, by Blussé on Batavia (now Jakarta) and Marshall on Calcutta, nevertheless concentrate on the first centuries of European presence. Both stress the relationship between the city and its agricultural hinterland. Blussé argues that many of the problems from which Batavia suffered during the course of the eighteenth century derived from the destruction of the ecology of its immediate hinterland, itself a consequence of the extensive sugar production developed by the Dutch and the Chinese who came to live under their control. The result was that the city became steadily less and less healthy, and this, together with the absence of *burgher* rights for the Dutch population of the city and the continued VOC dominance, led to the steady decline of Batavia. Only with the re-establishment of Dutch rule after the Napoleonic interlude did Batavia again begin to flourish and to develop towards the enormous city that Jakarta was now become.

It is instructive to contrast this with Calcutta in the same period, as described by Marshall. He argues convincingly that, at least during the eighteenth century,

the growth of the city of Calcutta and the economic activities of Europeans in Bengal did not radically change the economic life of the city's hinterland. The growth of European trade merely led to the intensification of the old activities of food-stuff production and textile manufacturing without any major changes in the methods or relations of production. While in Batavia the activities of the immigrants determined almost everything, to the detriment of the whole area, in Calcutta the Indian merchants were still in control of many aspects of life, often, indeed, providing the capital for European enterprise. The relatively open-ended relationship would only change to one of inequality in the course of the next century.

The following three chapters all describe cities in which the initial basis of social organisation was slavery, not only in the urban setting, as was the case in Batavia, but also in the rural hinterland. Thus the essays concentrate on the relationship between the urban and rural worlds and on the hierarchical structures that derive from them. In his discussion of Cape Town, Ross argues that the abolition of the slave trade meant the end of the Asian character of the city, which had come about as a result of the importation of large numbers of Indonesian and Indian Islamic slaves and of the dominance of the primarily Asian-oriented Dutch East India Company. Thereafter Cape Town became more of a city which linked the African continent to the outside world, even though it has always maintained a special flavour which distinguishes it from the rest of South Africa. Only then was the city forced to accept a pattern of residential segregation according to race, which gradually replaced the more fluid ones of wealth and status.

Much the same pattern can be seen in the discussion of Rio de Janeiro, by Karasch, and of Kingston, Jamaica, by Clarke. Certainly in the period of slavery, free and slave lived in the same areas, a necessary consequence of the fact that many of the slaves worked as domestic servants. Obviously there were considerable distinctions in wealth and respectability among the various neighbourhoods, particularly in Rio after the migration of the Portuguese court to its colonial capital in 1808. This led to a considerable programme of urban renewal and also to a very substantial growth in the slave population, in which colour and status were closely related, residential patterns already reflected differences in occupation, status and, to a certain degree, racial categorisation.

Kingston, too, did not demonstrate a high degree of social segregation until after the abolition of slavery. Since status was highly ascriptive, based largely on descent, space was not necessary as a marker of social distance. Only after 1838, as sugar declined as the mainstay of the Jamaican economy, and Kingston lost its status as a free port, did colour, culture and spatial segregation become increasingly important considerations in the urban ecology of Kingston. Even though the town's economy was in decline, there was a steady migration from the equally depressed countryside, so that slums of disadvantaged blacks began to form, until, in 1938, the unemployed rose in major, if unsuccessful riots.

In this apparent paradox of a harsh system of exploitation coinciding with a

situation of racial coexistence there is a contrast to be seen with the colonial capitals of the new empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Algiers, as described by Miège, Saigon, according to Guillaume, and Dakar, dealt with in the chapter by Betts, there was from the beginning a definite spatial distinction between the 'white' town and the area inhabited by the local population, whether Algerian, Vietnamese or Senegalese. This was not merely because all three were part of the French Empire. The same phenomenon could have been seen in the English or Belgian cities of tropical Africa, for instance. The reason lies in the fact that all three were in countries with a substantial indigenous population and, at least in Algeria and Vietnam, a long tradition of urbanisation. They were not, as were the slave societies of the New World and at least the Cape Colony in South Africa, new-made social systems, cooked according to the recipe of the colonisers. In the development of their colonial capitals and ports, then, the Europeans were forced to accommodate not only the original town dwellers, but also large numbers of country folk, detached from their local roots by the disruptions of colonial rule and eager to partake of the often illusory benefits of urban living. But at the same time, the Europeans with their increasingly fastidious standards, felt the need to distance themselves from the 'natives'. A bipartite city structure was the result.

There were, of course, numbers of people who attempted to cross the social and spatial gap between the two parts of the city. Frequently these might be immigrant 'third' groups, such as the Syrians in Dakar, or alternatively those Africans or Vietnamese who were prepared, and had managed, to acquire the criteria for European culture. In general, however, there was considerable resistance on the part of the European settlers to the absorption of *evolués* into their ranks. This was perhaps particularly the case in Algiers, where European settlement was most considerable, even though, admittedly, a large proportion of these immigrants were not French, but rather Spanish, Italian or Maltese. In Saigon, in contrast, a genuine Vietnamese bourgeoisie began to develop, which formed the basis of collaboration with colonial, and later neo-colonial powers. At any event, in time, as the towns became more populous, largely as a result of immigration from their hinterlands, European control became increasingly difficult to maintain. The culmination of this demographic process was the battle for Algiers, in 1960, the fiercest conflict in any colonial city - unless that honour should be reserved for the Tet offensive in Saigon.

Not all cities that grew up in the colonies, however, were so clearly colonial as these. In his chapter on Bombay, Kooiman shows that, although this city was founded by the colonial rulers and remained the gateway to India for the British, its enormous growth was not the consequence of British activity. Rather it was the development of an Indian-owned textile industry that brought the largely Maharashtra peasants to Bombay. Even in a colonial capital, the imperial power was not the prime mover of everything. This is perhaps more true of India than of many other colonies, but it was always, to a greater or lesser degree, the case.

It is the intention behind this series of volumes that they be comparative. Just how far the present volume has succeeded is for the reader to judge, not the editors. Nevertheless, there is at the very least the suspicion that the central chapters of this work achieve a juxtaposition of different cities and their histories, but not a true comparison. This is probably all to the good. Far too often, strict comparative works fall into the trap of being no more than check lists, in which the presence or absence of a particular trait in any given unit of study is scrupulously recorded, but which do not further analysis or understanding, at least in the absence of an enormous data base and the possibility of massive correlations. Rather, we have hoped that, by putting together essays on a variety of cities scattered across the world and through time, the similarities and dissimilarities will provoke thought, and thought in its turn more research and understanding.

It is for this reason that the cities described in this volume are so widely spread. The only major arbitrary limitation is that they are almost all the primate cities of the country in which they are found. Even the two essays on Indian cities deal with the capitals of what were the Presidencies of Bengal and Bombay. This has meant that they are almost all ports, since, as was mentioned above, outside Spanish America very few colonial capitals were not ports, at least where the colony had a coastline. For the rest they are spread through time, with the period covered ranging from the early seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, in space – there are five studies on Asia, three on Africa and three on the New World – and in terms of colonial ruler – three cities were ruled by the French, three by the British, two by the Dutch, one by the Spanish, one by the Portuguese and one city was taken over by the British from the Dutch who had founded it.

Nevertheless, it was necessary to impose some semblance of order on this potential chaos. This was done in two ways. First, there are three key themes that are to be found, more or less explicitly, in each of the contributions in this book. These are: the function of the city, in particular its position as a link between the outside world, and the world-economy, and its hinterland; the organisation of the city, the way it was governed and held in control, frequently a major problem in the turbulence of colonial society; and, lastly, the spatial lay-out of the city, and in particular the ways in which this encoded and determined social stratification and categorisation.

Secondly, we have sandwiched the central chapters of the book between two general essays, by King and De Bruijne, in which general features of all colonial cities are analysed. King defines concepts and typologies which can be used to further the study of colonial cities. De Bruijne, on the other hand, sees his main purpose in providing questions for the furthering of this field of inquiry. In a sense, then, this book both begins and ends with questions, and if they, and the empirical chapters between them, manage to stimulate others to help in the process of answering them, it will have fulfilled much of its purpose.