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Citation

Thakur, V. (2025). Colonialism. In B. Jahn & S. Schindler (Eds.), *Elgar Encyclopedias in the Social Sciences* (pp. 52-53). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. doi:10.4337/9781035312283.00028

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4210714>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

23. Colonialism

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Colonialism comes from the Latin word *colōnia*, meaning a settled farmland or a plantation. In the sense of its verb form, 'to plant', humans have cultivated new spaces since the dawn of human social history. However, this process has often involved conquest, i.e. a violent extirpation and subjugation of those who already occupied the land. Colonialism, hence, traditionally understood, is the physical occupation of a foreign territory.

Colonialism may have a long history, but modern colonialism, which is usually dated to the early sixteenth century, is distinct in several aspects. First, the modern colonial encounter, starting with the Iberian colonization of the Americas, was extraordinarily genocidal. Nearly 95 per cent of the pre-Columbian population was obliterated in a span of decades. Second, modern colonialism was underwritten by capitalism. If pre-capitalist colonial projects were identified with a warring leader seeking glory and tribute (an Alexander or a Genghis Khan), the key figure in the transition from pre-capitalist empires to capitalist empires was the often lowly born merchant explorer, à la Columbus, chasing new trade routes. Third, modern colonialism was also co-terminus with the emergence of the idea of humanity in the West. These are not separate phenomena. As Sylvia Wynter shows, modern colonialism invented the non-human, a figure of abject otherness reduced entirely to one's biology, against whom the rights-bearing 'western man' became a subject category. Fourth, aided by technological leaps in the means of transport, volumes of production, methods of violence and organization of bureaucracy, modern colonialism became unprecedentedly global. What distinguished it from earlier phases was the geographically skewed nature of colonial control: such a large part of the world was colonized by a disproportionately small area. By the 1930s, when Nazi *Lebensraum* and *Grossraum* forced a reckoning about internal colonialism, Europe had already colonized 84.6 per cent of the global landmass.

Although colonial governance differed widely and was often tailored to contexts, historians have suggested three broad phases of modern colonialism. In the first phase, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, spread

mostly over the Americas, were truly about God, gold and guns. The Catholic empires, which needed constant validation from the Vatican, paid as much attention to the motives of proselytization as they did to mining gold and silver. They were also outrightly about conquest and thought of the 'natives' as only good for conversion or extermination. The over-dependence on a single-commodity economy eventually resulted in their ruin through high inflation and constant fuelling of intra-European wars. Protestant empires – the English and Dutch, later followed by the French – were driven predominantly, at least theoretically, by commerce rather than conquest in the second phase. Learning from the Iberian experience, they sought to avoid dependence on mineral commodities and excessive proselytization. Instead, free trade and pliable political institutions did the chief work for them. Their colonial systems were built around exploitation of labour through slavery, indenture and, from the late nineteenth century in Southern Africa, minework.

Over time, as industrialization, increasing European rivalries and resistance from the colonized rendered colonialism both unmanageable and unprofitable for merchant companies, the colonies were taken over by the respective states. In addition to profit, new rationales were added. Several colonies, mostly in temperate lands, were increasingly developed as 'settler colonies' to export Europe's excess populations. Further, each colonial power developed its own models of colonial control, from indirect rule (rule through local elites) to direct rule, and from segregation (Britain) to association/assimilation (France).

The third phase of colonialism is often termed 'neocolonialism'. It refers to the creation of economic and social relations of dependency between the metropole and the (former) colony without direct rule, hence achieving the economic aims of colonialism without seeking explicit political control. This is what Latin American countries faced from the nineteenth century and Asian and African countries were confronted with after the Second World War.

Mainstream approaches in International Relations (IR) – realism, liberalism and constructivism – have largely evaded discussions of historical and contemporary effects of colonialism. It is predominantly postcolonial, decolonial and Marxist scholars who have

taken colonialism as a serious category of analysis within the discipline. While Marxist scholarship emphasizes the primary role played by capitalism as a mode of production in sustaining (neo)colonialism, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives nuance this analysis by demonstrating the role that racial practices have played in stabilizing and furthering colonialism. They argue that a class perspective alone cannot explain the predominantly 'white' composition of the global capital, the racial nature of class formation in the colonies, and the differing degrees of violence inflicted on the colonial and the white proletariat.

Scholars have attempted to bring 'colonialism' into IR by emphasizing three processes, erasures, continuities and manifestations. Through a process of theoretical abstraction, Sankaran Krishna argues, IR theories have *erased* the historical experiences of genocidal violence, land and labour expropriation and the modes of resistance of the colonized. IR concepts such as 'anarchy' – that embed equality into the international system – are ideological conceits that hide the actual process of how the world was made through imposed hierarchies of colonialism. Furthermore, one can witness the *continuities* of colonialism in the way terms such as 'development', 'failed states', 'sovereignty', 'nuclear order', 'liberal interventionism' and so on are deployed in IR. They invariably become ways to 'civilize' the formerly colonized world. And finally, it would be a folly to think of even physical

colonialism being firmly in the past. Palestine is a case in point of its current *manifestation*; and so are the settler colonial states which have turned colonialism into a settled fact, to the detriment of the First Nations.

Further reading

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