

Scholarly Analysis: Western Civilization's Legacy has a Dark Side

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Australia's native indigenous people, Aboriginals, of Palm Island Australia in 1935. The Aboriginals, like Native Americans of North America, were subject to the colonization of European countries. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Core values

It is normal to hear that Judeo-Christian values are the core of Western civilization. It's a bit misleading, though, to lump together Jewish and Christian history. The truth is that Jews have long been mistreated throughout the Christian world.

So what are the Judeo-Christian values at the core of Western civilization? There's no simple answer. Besides, whatever values Western societies hold dear, the history of Western civilization has a dark side. The story of the West is also a story of oppression and greed.

Colonialism

Colonialism was a brutal event in history. It was unleashed in the 1700s by a number of European countries. It allowed businesses to take advantage of millions of workers, and let Western civilization culturally and politically dominate most of the rest of the world.

Colonialism was a disgraceful robbery of land and resources from large parts of the human population. It was all in the service of the colonizing powers' endless greed. There's an African saying that sums up the story of colonialism well: "When white man came we had the land, they had the Bible. Now we have the Bible and they have the land."

European countries incorporated colonies into their economies. This required the destruction of native economies and cultures. It gave rise to racism, and created systems of oppression that still affect millions.

Genocide

Colonialism took place around the same time as the largest human movement in history. Millions of Europeans, Chinese and Indians were migrating to new lands in Africa, the Americas and Australia. New countries were established on lands taken forcibly from their local inhabitants. These native peoples were systematically displaced or destroyed.

Within a century and half of British occupation, Australia's native population declined by 80 percent. The mass deaths were due to diseases, repression and violence. In the U.S., the native population declined by 95 percent within 200 years of European occupation.

The same type of destruction took place in African and South American colonies.

Global inequalities

Colonialism led to huge advantages for the English-speaking world. Consider the countries that grew out of Great Britain: United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Together they have just 5.5 percent of the world's population and 19 percent of Earth's land mass.

In comparison, China and India have 38 percent of the world's population and 8 percent of Earth's land mass.

These differences have worked to the great economic advantage of Western civilization. It has given Westerners exclusive access to huge mineral, agriculture and other vital resources. This helped their somewhat small populations, making global economic inequalities worse.

Exclusion of natives and migrants

The inequalities were created and maintained, in part, by racism and exclusion. Colonial powers claimed that new colonies were "white man's countries," and excluded the "nonwhites" and native population from citizenship.

The native people and "nonwhites" could only work as indentured laborers, servants and slaves. They had no legal rights to permanent residency and ownership of land and economic resources. Laws were made to deny the natives such rights and to expel nonwhite workers, or to exclude them from entering the colonies.

Democracy and exclusion

European powers established systems for governments in their colonies that were modeled after their own governments. So democracy spread, but it wasn't open to everyone. In some places, Europeans favored one ethnic group over another and some ethnic groups were excluded. Racism was widespread and extreme, and it limited native people's participation in society.

Militarism

Militarism is another result of the colonialism. Colonial powers built up a massive military establishment that continues to loom over the rest of the world. In 2012, the military spending of the United States, Australia, Canada, the UK and New Zealand amounted to \$794 billion. These five countries accounted for 46 percent of total global military spending, with the U.S. accounting for 40 percent. By comparison, China and India's accounted for 9.5 percent and 2.6 percent respectively of global military spending.

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Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "Colonialism."

There's an African saying that sums up the story of colonialism well: "When white man came we had the land, they had the Bible. Now we have the Bible and they have the land."

Based on the selection, what is the author saying about colonialism?

- (A) that colonialism was rooted in trade of land and Bibles between white men and Africans
- (B) that colonialism is just a story of how Europeans wanted to spread Biblical teachings around the world
- (C) that colonialism involved white Europeans pretending to be fair, when in reality, they were greedy
- (D) that colonialism was not as violent and brutal as it is often made out to be

- 2 Read the paragraph.

Militarism is another result of the colonialism. Colonial powers built up a massive military establishment that continues to loom over the rest of the world. In 2012, the military spending of the United States, Australia, Canada, the UK and New Zealand amounted to \$794 billion. These five countries accounted for 46 percent of total global military spending, with the U.S. accounting for 40 percent. By comparison, China and India's accounted for 9.5 percent and 2.6 percent respectively of global military spending.

Which of the following phrases from the article helps you understand the meaning of the phrase "loom over"?

- (A) built up
- (B) massive military
- (C) amounted to \$794 billion
- (D) by comparison

- 3 Which of the following MAIN claims is supported by logical reasons and evidence in the article?
- (A) Judeo-Christian values such as democracy and freedom are central to the legacy of Western civilization.
 - (B) Western civilizations brutalized native people and lands for hundreds of years and still reap the benefits.
 - (C) The English-speaking nations controls more land than more populated, non-English-speaking countries.
 - (D) At the core of colonialism is democracy, which encourages all to establish fair and powerful governments.

- 4 In the article, the author claims that colonialism continues to benefit countries that descend from Great Britain.

How does the author support this claim in the article?

- (A) by explaining that colonialism was a brutal and violent event that dates back to the 1700s
- (B) by providing evidence of how native peoples were violently treated and forced off their lands
- (C) by highlighting the flaws in democracy and revealing how exclusive that form of government is
- (D) by comparing the populations and land masses of English-speaking and non-English-speaking nations