

How Have Ideas About Nature Shaped the Histories and Legacies of colonialism?

Subject: History

The overarching colonialist idea about nature is our human superiority over it; this, in turn, informs the view that we have ownership and dominion over nature, and that it is a commodity to be exploited for capitalist gain. In this essay, I am going to examine each of these concepts, and how they have shaped the histories and legacies of colonialism.

Butt (2013) identified three primary characteristics of colonialism: the domination and oppression of one people over another; the exploitation of the indigenous land, resources and peoples; and the imposition and homogenisation of colonial values and culture onto the colonised peoples^[1]. Collectively, these work with the colonial process to create an 'imaginative hegemony' between humans and nature^[2]. This idea was created in the 1990's to mean the domination and superiority of humans over the environment and its resources^[2]. Before colonisation, many areas did not have a concept of 'the environment'; there was no separation of nature from ourselves and our societies^[2]. It was simply a part of our lives, cultures and histories. Today, in previously colonised areas there is a disconnected relationship between humans and nature; one is opposed to another - one presides over the other. This is perhaps one of the strongest and most prevalent modern legacies of colonialism around the world today.

Dominion over colonised land and peoples was achieved through illegal seizures of land, the undermining of indigenous resistance, and the legitimisation and institutionalisation of colonial processes. Each of these stages were important because, in order to move exploitation of indigenous land and culture onto a mass scale, governments were required to legitimise and regulate the commodification of nature and its resources in their colonies^[3]. Indigenous land was claimed by colonisers, who devalued the titles or heritage of the land and gave it a new purpose for the development and betterment of their empire^[2]. These include private land ownership, arable and pastoral agriculture, mining and the extraction of other resources. In addition to this, the creation of national parks was used as a tool to further legitimise these new claims to the land whilst suppressing indigenous ones^[3]. For instance, in America and New

Zealand - both settler societies - the newcomers designated natural areas with legal protections in order to create a new cultural purpose for them^[3]. The creation of these national parks institutionalised the colonial process and its ideals. To this day, this undermines any previous ties or claims to the land and continues to suppress indigenous peoples, as well as creating a divide between citizens and subjects^{[3][4]}. Furthermore, projects such as peace parks - designated areas of the environment which are protected and conserved - are reproduced from national parks, which further perpetuates this colonial legacy into modern times^[4].

Biblical ideals about nature further strengthened this 'imaginary hegemony' between humans and nature: we have 'dominion' over the animals and the Earth and an obligation to 'rule' over and 'subdue' them^{[3][5]}. This, alongside Christian evangelism, empowered the colonial process because it brought 'true' religious values to indigenous peoples, and was thereby validated and supported by the ideology of a Christian God^[3]. Furthermore, domination over indigenous peoples was further cemented through the use of language^[3]. Phrases such as 'beyond the pale' in Ireland, 'the dark continent' in Africa and the 'wild west' in America emphasised the primitive and dangerous images associated with the colonies and their surrounding land^[3]. This reinforced the differences between coloniser and colonised, as well as emphasising the suppression of indigenous resistance. This language use brought a secondary benefit by establishing the need to weaponize and rationalise extreme measures of control and authority in the colonies. Measures such as managing waterways for trade and communications also made the colonies and their peoples easier to control and defend from any uprisings^[3]. Moreover, uses of water could also be used to suppress indigenous populations - irrigation in particular helped to enforce a more sedentary lifestyle onto the mostly nomadic indigenous peoples in the colonies^[3]. This not only changed their ways of life and weakened their connections to their cultures and environments, but it also made them easier to control and govern^[3]. This, additionally, made agriculture a more profitable endeavour in the colonies by exporting produce overseas and back to the core of the empire^[3]. As a result, empires were allowed and encouraged to expand, conquer and develop. Meanwhile, colonised land was stolen and repurposed, and indigenous peoples were suppressed and exploited.

Before colonisation, many indigenous cultures had strong connections to their lands and environments which have now been systematically eroded. For example, the indigenous Polynesian Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand)

have strong cultural ties to te taiao (the biophysical environment and our interactions with it)^[6]. This interconnectedness with the environment comes from Māori creation stories of Papatūānuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father) and the stages of creation^[7]. In these stories, the Māori come from, and are a part of, the Earth^[7]. This is what gives them their innate connection to the environment, and they feel that they owe a debt to the Earth for creation^[7]. Māoris have an almost symbiotic relationship with te taiao, and believe that it is important to nurture this connection^[7]. All of this informs their kaitiaki approach - similar to Christian stewardship - which involves caring for and protecting the environment.

However, this connection was antithetical to the colonist mindset. Instead, the duty to control and order the world; evangelise and technologically advance, led to the destruction of nature on a large scale - still persisting today. Colonisers saw land not as something to respect, nurture and protect, but as something to exploit. They thought that their land uses - commercial agriculture, mining and the production of other resources - were more productive and valuable to progression than indigenous ones^[3]. Nature was utilised, appropriated, and in most cases destroyed for economic means, indiscriminate to areas of indigenous cultural or historic value^[3]. This involved exploiting the land for resources, but also adapting the environment to suit the colonisers' needs^[3]. An example of the adaptation of colonised land would be in Australia: invasive species, such as sheep, were introduced and allowed to graze the land^[3]. Sheep were first introduced to Australia in 1788 on the First Fleet^[8]. They were fat-tailed sheep bred specifically for their meat^[8]. However, they were not suited to the Australian climate and did not produce quality wool^[8]. Later, merino sheep, bred for their wool, were farmed^[3]. This was to feed the growing consumer diet in the core of the empire - meats, 'exotic' fruits and out-of-season vegetables - and became the framework for the rapidly increasing wool trade in Australia. The introduction of invasive species involved the large scale displacement of indigenous people and mass deforestation of land for grazing^[3]. It is one environmental problem which is gaining traction and understanding today, but the consequences are still being felt. In Australia, the adaptation of the indigenous land led to a number of problems. The deforestation left the soils open to erosion and leaching and the sheep and other introduced species compacted the soil^[9]. This reduced the soil quality by decreasing the pore spaces for air and water, thereby also reducing the agricultural yields as plant roots struggled to grow^[9]. Once the idea of dividing, claiming ownership over, and pillaging land for resources in the name of economic growth and development was

legitimised, it left no room for the recognition of the indigenous bonds and connections to nature and their lands.

Today, the legacy of colonialism runs throughout our modern governmental decisions and wishes to develop^[3]. These 'developments' come from the skeleton of colonialism, with similar attitudes towards nature, resources and peoples^[3]. The destruction of nature for capitalist gain is seen as the way forward for progression and advancement. This can be seen in rapidly developing countries such as Brazil, where rainforests are consistently deforested to service economic growth despite the global ramifications.

The homogenisation of European culture onto indigenous people was a result of the belief that European cultures and peoples held a 'superiority' over indigenous equivalents. European colonists, especially in the mid-18th century, believed that they had a duty to develop the world and spread their 'Europeanness'^[3]. 'Eurocentric Diffusion' is a model suggesting that Europeans progressed more than non-Europeans due to their supposed 'superior' qualities and environments, which acted as a rationale for colonialism^[10]. This superiority - in technology, customs, values and commodities - had to be shared with the rest of the world in order to develop and enrich it^[10]. To do this, they suppressed the indigenous cultures; repurposed their land and knowledge; and imposed their own European values onto these colonies^[10]. One of the strongest examples of this is Christian evangelism. Christian missionaries often collaborated alongside European colonial governments to evangelise and bring salvation to the colonised peoples and spread their religious values. Naturally, 'Eurocentric Diffusion' also involved the colonised peoples returning this 'gift of Europeanness' in the form of labour, resources and land^[10]. Furthermore, the exportation of capitalism is one of the most significant colonial changes, and has had huge impacts on the environment. The inherent need for growth and development under capitalism decimated resources in the colonies, as well as polluting land, water and air as a result of the advancing technology. Colonists viewed the newly colonised land as an 'unending frontier' (never-ending land full of resources) for the service of the empire, and exploited indigenous resources without considering the consequences^[11]. This has created environmental destruction - for instance, pollution, visual scarring and resource depletion - and the same exploitative attitudes have been translated into modern developments. Moreover, the adaptation of land for exploitation under capitalism, as previously discussed, was one of the most

prevalent instances of environmental homogenisation. A second example would be how the European Sailors used the Azores - a series of islands in the Atlantic ocean - to replenish their stock before continuing on their journey home^[3]. They introduced sheep and, with no natural predators, they ravaged the landscape^[3].

Finally, the persistent legacies of colonialism include modern conservation practices and ideas^[3]. Whilst many believe, at least in England, that modern environmentalism and conservationism came from the Romantics and Industrial Revolution, its origin actually lies in the colonial mindset^[3]. The notion of managing the environment to allow for the sustainable, long-term use of its resources is a central part of many environmental action plans around the world^[3]. However, this idea is not rooted in protecting and respecting the environment, but in its exploitation. In addition to this, the capitalist need for consumption - especially prevalent in the global West - going hand-in-hand with core colonialist and imperial attitudes, has led to the degradation and pollution of our natural environment^[2]. The over-extraction of resources from our land and waters has forever changed the Earth's landscape^[2]. Today, people are continuing to be exploited for their land and resources in a more covert fashion than during the height of the colonialist era. For example, food production in countries such as Kenya does not create food security for the country, instead being exported to Western consumer countries, leaving Kenyans with high levels of food scarcity^[3].

To conclude, the impact of ideas surrounding nature on the colonialist legacy have been carried into modern ideals and governance, as well as individual goals and desires^[2]. Indigenous communities have been separated from the environment around them and any cultural and historical ties have been all but severed. Additionally, humans view nature primarily as a resource - a commodity to be exploited for profit - rather than something to protect, nurture and connect with. Development is continuing the trend of sacrificing nature for growth and our socio-political climate is marked by the persistent alienation of peoples from their land and resources. We must continue to fight for environmental and colonial justice, and reject the damaging legacies of the colonial process.

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