

# The Disenfranchised Colonies



Du Bois BEGINS this article with the important point that colonialism has created much of the poverty, ignorance, and disease found in the world. He goes on to challenge the "recent masters of the world" who have "an eternal lien on civilization" and with it, the right to control the future of other people. Du Bois outlines at length the mechanisms of colonial domination and power. In this he is remarkably prophetic, suggesting theoretical models that were later introduced by authors like Franz Fanon in works such as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

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Colonies and the colonial system make the colonial peoples in a sense the slums of the world, disfranchised and held in poverty and disease.

Colonies are the slums of the world. They are today the places of greatest concentration of poverty, disease, and ignorance of what the human mind has come to know. They are centers of helplessness, of discouragement of initiative, of forced labor, and of legal suppression of all activities or thoughts which the master country fears or dislikes.

They resemble in some ways the municipal slums of the nineteenth century in culture lands. In those days men thought of slums as inevitable, as being caused in a sense by the wretched people who inhabited them, as yielding to no remedial action in any conceivable time. If abolished, the dregs of humanity would re-create them. Then we were jerked back to

our senses by the realization that slums were investments where housing, sanitation, education, and spiritual freedom were lacking, and where for this reason the profits of the landlords, the merchants, and the exploiters were enormous.

To most people this characterization of colonies will seem overdrawn, and of course in one major respect colonies differ radically from slums. Municipal slums are mainly festering sores drawing their substance from the surrounding city and sharing the blood and the culture of that city. Colonies, on the other hand, are for the most part quite separate in race and culture from the peoples who control them. Their culture is often ancient and historically fine and valuable, spoiled too often by misfortune and conquest and misunderstanding. This sense of separation, therefore, makes colonies usually an integral entity beyond the sympathy and the comprehension of the ruling world. But in both city and colony, labor is forced by poverty, and crime is largely disease.

What, then, are colonies? Leaving analogies, in this case none too good, we look to facts, and find them also elusive. It is difficult to define a colony precisely. There are the dry bones of statistics; but the essential facts are neither well measured nor logically articulated. After all, an imperial power is not interested primarily in censuses, health surveys, or historical research. Consequently we know only approximately, and with wide margins of error, the colonial population, the number of the sick and the dead, and just what happened before the colony was conquered.

For the most part, today the colonial peoples are colored of skin; this was not true of colonies in other days, but it is mainly true today. And to most minds, this is of fatal significance; coupled with Negro slavery, Chinese coolies, and doctrines of race inferiority, it proves to most white folk the logic of the modern colonial system: Colonies are filled with peoples who never were abreast with civilization and never can be.

This rationalization is very satisfactory to empire-builders and investors, but it does not satisfy science today, no matter how much it did yesterday. Skin color is a matter of climate, and colonies today are mainly in the hot, moist tropics and semitropics. Naturally, here skins are colored. But historically these lands also were seats of ancient cultures among normal men. Here human civilization began, in Africa, Asia, and Central America. What has happened to these folk across the ages? They have been conquered, enslaved, oppressed, and exploited by stronger invaders. But was this invading force invariably stronger in body, keener in mind, and higher in culture? Not necessarily, but always stronger

in offensive technique, even though often lower in culture and only average in mind.

Offensive technique drew the conquerors down upon the conquered, because the conquered had the fertile lands, the needed materials, the arts of processing goods for human needs. With the conquerors concentrating time and thought on these aspects of culture, usually the conquered could not oppose the barbarians with muscle, clubs, spears, gunpowder, and capital. In time, the invaders actually surpassed, and far surpassed, the weaker peoples in wealth, technique, and variety of culture patterns, and made them slaves to industry and servants to white men's ease.

But what of the future? Have the present masters of the world such an eternal lien on civilization as to ensure unending control? By no means; their very absorption in war and wealth has so weakened their moral fiber that the end of their rule is in sight. Also, the day of the colonial conquered peoples dawns, obscurely but surely.

Today, then, the colonial areas lie inert or sullenly resentful or seething with hate and unrest. With unlimited possibilities, they have but scraps of Africa, Pan-Africa, and Imperialism understanding of modern accumulations of knowledge; but they are pressing toward education with bitter determination. The conquerors, on the other hand, are giving them only the passing attention which preoccupation with problems of wealth and power at home leaves for colonial "problems."

What, then, do modern colonies look like, feel like? It is difficult to draw any universal picture. Superficial impressions are common: black boys diving for pennies; human horses hitched to rickshaws; menial service in plethora for a wage near nothing; absolute rule over slaves, even to life and death; fawning, crawling obeisance; high salaries, palaces, and luxury coupled with abject, nauseating, diseased poverty—this in a vague, imperfect way paints the present colonial world.

It is not nearly so easy as it would appear to fill in this outline and make it precise and scientific. Empires do not want nosy busybodies snooping into their territories and business. Visitors to colonies are, to be sure, allowed and even encouraged; but their tours are arranged, officials guide them in space and in thought, and they see usually what the colonial power wants them to see and little more. Dangerous "radicals" are rigorously excluded. My own visits to colonies have been rare and unsatisfactory. Several times I have tried in vain to visit South Africa. No visas were obtainable. I have been in British and French West Africa and in Jamaica.

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In Sierra Leone I landed at Freetown in 1923. I was passed through the customs without difficulty, as my papers were in order. Then for some reason the authorities became suspicious. With scant courtesy, I was summoned peremptorily down to headquarters, to a room off the common jail, with pictures of escaped criminals decorating the walls. What did I want in Sierra Leone? I handed in my passport, showing that I was United States Minister Plenipotentiary to Liberia, stopping simply to visit on my way home. The commissioner unbent and dismissed me. That afternoon I was invited to a tea party at the governor's mansion! What would have happened to me if I had not had a diplomatic passport, or if I had been merely a colored man seeking to study a British colony?

The same year I visited Senegal and Conakry. I was received with great courtesy, but into the ruling caste; I had no contact with the mass of the colonial people. I lodged with the American consul; the French consul had me at dinner and the English consul at tea in his palatial mansion. But little did I see or learn of the millions of Negroes who formed the overwhelming mass of the colonial population.

In 1915, I visited Jamaica. I landed at Kingston and then, being tired and on vacation, did the unconventional thing of walking across the island to Mantego Bay. I immediately became an object of suspicion. It was wartime. I was in a sense, albeit unconsciously, intruding into Jamaica's backyard. I had proper visas, but I was not following the beaten path of the tourist. I was soon warned by a furtive black man that the police were on my track. My only recourse was to look up a long-time friend, principal of the local school. He ostentatiously drove me downtown, seated with him high in his surrey behind prancing horses. Thus was I properly introduced and vouched for. The point is that in all these cases one saw the possibility of arbitrary power without appeal and of a race and class situation unknown in free countries.

In the main, colonial peoples are living abnormally, save those of the untouched or inert mass of natives. Where the whites form a small ruling group, they are most abnormal and are not, as is assumed, replicas of the home group. They consist chiefly of representatives of commercial concerns whose first object is to make money for themselves and the corporations they represent. They are in the main hard-boiled, often ruthless businessmen, unrestrained by the inhibitions of home in either law or custom. Next come the colonial officials, either identical with the commercial men or more or less under their domination, especially through home influence. Colonials and businessmen clash, but business usually wins. Sometimes

philanthropic career officials get the upper hand; but they are in danger of being replaced or losing promotion. The official class-heads, assistants, clerks, wives, and children—are apt to be arrogant, raised above their natural position and feeling their brief authority; they lord it over despised natives and demand swift and exemplary punishment for any affront to their dignity. The courts presided over by whites are usually even-handed in native quarrels, but through fear are strict, harsh, and even cruel in cases between natives and whites. White prestige must be maintained at any cost. There is usually a considerable group of white derelicts, hangers-on, sadistic representatives of the “superior race,” banished to colonies by relatives who are ashamed to keep them at home.

This whole group of whites forms a caste apart, lives in segregated, salubrious, and protected areas, seldom speaks the vernacular or knows the masses except officially. Their regular income from colonial services is liberal according to home standards and often fantastic according to the standard of living in colonies. Conceive of an income of \$10,000 a year for a colonial governor over people whose average income is \$25 a year! The officials get frequent vacations with pay, and are pensioned after comparatively short service. The pensions are paid for life by colonial taxation, and the pensioners are regarded as experts on colonial matters the rest of their lives.

Where the white resident contingent is relatively large, as in South Africa and Kenya, the caste conditions are aggravated and the whites become the colony while the natives are ignored and neglected except as low-paid labor largely without rights that the colonists need respect.

Below this group of white overlords are the millions of natives. Their normal and traditional life has been more or less disrupted and changed in work, property, family life, recreation, health habits, food, religion, and other cultural matters. Their initiative, education, freedom of action, have been interfered with to a greater or less extent. Authority has been almost entirely withdrawn from their control and the white man's word is law in most cases. Their native standards of life have been destroyed and the new standards cannot be met by a poverty that is the worst in the world. The mass of natives sink into careless, inert, or sullen indifference, making their contact with whites as rare as possible, and incurring repeated punishment for laziness and infraction of arbitrary or inexplicable rules.

Up from these rise two groups: the toadies or “white folks niggers,” who use flattery and talebearing to curry favor; and the resentful, bitter, and ambitious who seek by opposition or education to achieve the emancipation

of their land and people. The educated and the half-educated, in particular, are the object of attack and dislike by the whites and are endlessly slandered in all testimony given visitors and scientists.

The missionaries form another class. They have been of all sorts of persons: unworldly visionaries, former pastors out of a job, social workers with and without social science, theologians, crackpots, and humanitarians. Their vocation is so unconventional that it is almost without standards of training or set norms of effort. Yet missionaries have spent tens of millions of dollars and influenced hundreds of millions of men with results that literally vary from heaven to hell. Missionaries represent the oldest invasion of whites, and incur at first the enmity of business and the friendship of natives. Colonial officials, on pressure from home, compromise differences, and the keener natives thereupon come to suspect missionary motives and the native toadies rush to get converted and cash in on benefits. The total result varies tremendously according to the pressure of these elements.

Despite a vast literature on colonial peoples, there is today no sound scientific basis for comprehensive study. What we have are reports of officials who set out to make a case for the imperial power in control; reports of missionaries, of all degrees of reliability and object; reports of travelers swayed by every conceivable motive and fitted or unfitted for testimony by widely varying education ideals, and reliability: When science tries to study colonial systems in Africa and Asia, it meets all sorts of hindrances and incomplete statements of fact. In few cases is there testimony from the colonial peoples themselves or impartial scientific surveys conducted by persons free of compulsion from imperial control and dictation.

The studies we have of colonial peoples and conditions are therefore unsatisfactory. Even the great *African Survey* edited by Lord Halley is mainly based on the testimony and the figures of colonial officials; that is, of men who represent the colonial organization, who are appointed on recommendation of persons whose fortunes are tied up with colonial profits, and who are naturally desirous of making the best-possible picture of colonial conditions. This does not mean that there is in this report, or in many others, deliberate and conscious deception; but there is the desire to make a case for the vested interests of a large and powerful part of the world's property-owners.

Other studies are made by visitors and outsiders who can get at the facts only as the government officials give them opportunity. Many opportunities have been afforded such students in the past, but the opportunities fall

far short of what complete and scientific knowledge demands. Moreover, such visitors arrive more or less unconsciously biased by their previous education and contacts, which lead them to regard the natives as on the whole a low order of humanity, and especially to distrust more or less completely the efforts of educated and aspiring Natives. The native elite, when through education and contact they get opportunity to study and tell of conditions, often, and naturally, defeat their own cause before a prejudiced audience by their bitterness and frustration and their inability to speak with recognized authority.

Thus, unfortunately, it is not possible to present or refer to any complete and documented body of knowledge which can give an undisputed picture of colonies today. This does not mean that we have no knowledge of colonial conditions; on the contrary, we have a vast amount of testimony and study; but practically every word of it can be and is disputed by interested parties, so that the truth can be reached only by the laborious interpretation of careful students. Nearly every assertion of students of colonial peoples is disputed today by colonial officials, many travelers, and a host of theorists. Despite this, greater unanimity of opinion is growing, but it is far from complete.

If, for instance, we complain of the conquest of harmless, isolated, and independent groups by great powers, it is answered that this is manifest destiny; that the leaders of world civilization must control and guide the backward peoples for the good of all. Otherwise these peoples relapse into revolting barbarism. If under this control colonial peoples are unhappy, it is answered that they are happier than they were formerly without control; and that they make greater progress when guided than when left alone.

If slavery and forced labor are complained of, the answer is that the natives are congenitally lazy and must be made to work for the good of mankind. Indeed, if they were not enslaved by Europeans, they would enslave each other. Low wages are justified by the fact that these peoples are simple, with low standards of living, while their industrialization is a boon to the world, and the world's welfare is paramount. Lack of broad educational plans is justified by their cost. Can England be asked to undertake the education of British Africa when she has not yet fully planned the education of British children at home? Moreover, why educate these simple folk into unhappiness and discontent? If they are trained at all, it should be to produce wealth for the benefit of themselves in part and of the empire in general. The seizing of the land and dividing it is looked upon not only as a policy which puts unused acreage into remunerative use, but also as

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one that compels folk to work who otherwise would sing and dance and sit in the sun. And in general, it is not clear from the testimony of history that the mass of colonial peoples can progress only under the guidance of the civilized white people, and is not the welfare of the whites in reality the welfare of the world?

Practically every one of these assertions has a certain validity and truth, and at the same time is just false and misleading enough to give an entirely unfair picture of the colonial world. The recent advance of anthropology, psychology, and other social sciences is beginning to show this, and beginning to prove on how false a premise these assertions are based and how fatal a body of folklore has been built upon it. These beliefs have been influenced by propaganda, by caricature, and by ignorance of the human soul. Today these attitudes must be challenged, and without trying to approach anything like completeness of scientific statement we may allude here to certain general matters concerning colonial peoples the truth of which cannot be disputed. . . .

**Source:** W. E. B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), pp. 17-26.