

Effects of Imperialism

The idea of being “affected” by something can vary when you consider the differences between positive and negative effects, or the extent to which the entity was affected. When we look at the early days of European imperialism, it is obvious that the colonized peoples took the brunt of the damage inflicted, and what they experienced can be explained further than just simply being “affected” by imperialism. They had their whole nations plundered and ravaged, while also suffering from cultural erasure at the same time. Take for example King Leopold’s genocide in the Congo in 1885. You cannot go as far to say those committing these acts were affected in a similar capacity. Although for the purpose of understanding the full scale effects of imperialism, the impacts it had on the European conquerors cannot be ignored. Through these imperialist missions, the Europeans created a new culture which promoted competition and conflict among their continent. While they did this, they also produced a breeding ground for revolution in the regions they were colonizing, leading to strong opposition they would face. The revolutionary attitude spread greatly and was especially apparent in the Algerian war for independence from France in the mid 1900s, discussed in Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. To this day, the effects of imperialism on colonized peoples are insurmountable due to the physical, economic, psychological and cultural harm they endured, so you cannot say the European conquerors were affected to the same extent. Although, the Europeans did shoot themselves in the foot in some aspects which hurt them in ways that differed from the subjugation faced by colonized peoples.

The age of imperialism was a time brought about by the drastic societal changes caused by the Industrial Revolution. Industrialization made possible new technological innovations such as stronger weapons, new modes of transportation, and other more modern technologies. The

economic side of industrialization also had implications for the rise of imperialism. Capitalism and the emergence of market driven economies led to countries having interests in expanding and creating new markets, located in different countries. The new industrialized economy, along with the profit incentive, drove up the demand for raw materials such as iron, coal, gold, rubber, and cotton. This created a strongly competitive attitude among European nations and essentially developed a new culture of imperialism. An example of this is what was known as the “Scramble for Africa” which was where many European nations were competing to colonize parts of Africa in order to extract raw materials and reap the economic benefits. Even with these economic motives, the European conquerors claimed to have different motives based in the ideas of racial superiority and what would be known as the “civilizing mission”. These claims were harmful as they added to this culture of imperialism and were fueled by harmful theories of scientific racism like Social Darwinism, which argue in support of innate racial characteristics and superiority. Although, scientific racism was not always the most effective form of justification as it was not rooted in any pure evidence or fact. This whole justification for imperialism can be summed up by the claims made by the colonizing nations that they were doing a moral good for the countries they colonized because they were “uncivilized” and needed to be civilized. The European conquerors had to find other ways to establish superiority, so they characterized the people they would be colonizing as inferior. Palestinian American academic, Edward Said, explores this idea in his book *Orientalism*. This idea is essentially that one needs an “other” to then define one’s “self” and in the case of orientalism, along with European imperialism, the dominant nations need an “other” who they define as inferior to claim they are superior.¹ The European nations felt that if they were able to spread these ideas and misconceptions about the countries they were colonizing, then the whole civilizing mission could gain more national support. In a poem called

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978).

the “The White Man’s Burden” these methods of propaganda are exemplified very explicitly as Rudyard Kipling wrote lines such as “To serve your captives’ needs”, “To Seek another’s profit, and work another’s gain”, and “Watch Sloth and heathen Folly” (referring to those who are “uncivilized”).² The racialization of imperialism was strong and this poem is important because it shows how outright the conquerors were about sharing their racist attitudes and that it was actually encouraged by many to take up this “White Man’s Burden”. Now that they created the culture, the gates were opened for the mass violence and suffering that would proceed.

Through the Europeans’ “civilizing mission” where they were meant to contribute to the societies they were colonizing, the people at the other end of the colonizing suffered harm on different levels whether that being physical, economic, psychological, or cultural. Not to mention these harms were long term and have had generational effects that lasted to this day. Edmund D. Morel explained the violence inflicted among African peoples through imperialism in a profound fashion when he stated, “It kills not the body merely, but the soul. It breaks the spirit...It wrecks his polity, uproots him from the land, invades his family life, destroys his natural pursuits and occupations...enslaves him in his own home.”³ This quote encapsulates the experience through the lense of the African being colonized through the age of imperialism. The part where he mentions that it kills the soul and not just the body is significant because it shows that imperialist violence, and violence in general, does not always have to be in its typical form which is “physical” or “hard”. Violence comes in many forms and each of these forms were felt in whole by the African people while they witnessed their whole lives change. King Leopold’s genocide in the Congo was a mass act of colonial violence that went more under the radar in historical accounts, while it was just as brutal as other genocides and significant events. From around 1885

² Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden”, History 4C Course Reader (Spring 2022), p. 39.

³ Edmund D. Morel, *The Black Man’s Burden*, History 4C Course Reader (Spring 2022), p. 41.

to 1908, there was an approximate death count of around 10 million people who suffered at the hands of King Leopold's rule. This inflicted physical harm on the Congolese people, and also caused mental harm to those who survived. Congo, along with other colonized nations, suffered from another form of violence which is not discussed as often, economic violence. A main source of the atrocities committed in the Congo was the horrid labor conditions, mostly surrounding rubber extraction. In lecture nine there is a picture shown from the Congo with the description, "Congolese children and women whose fathers or husbands failed to meet rubber collection quotas were often punished by having their hands cut off."⁴ This is an example of how economic exploitation and violence can be linked to physical violence, and in some cases intertwined with other forms of violence as well. The Scramble for Africa, which was mentioned earlier, was caused by economic motives and led to the overexploitation of Africa, leaving citizens of these wealthy countries poor because they did not enjoy the fruits of their labor. We see many of these countries that are described as "underdeveloped" or "poor", when that is not exactly the case. Historically, these are very wealthy countries that have just had their resources extracted and their people exploited to contribute to the wealth and wellbeing of European nations. This has had drastic effects on the economic development of countries that are trying to progress and essentially playing catch-up with the countries they are being exploited by. Along with economies, the European colonizers also destroyed the cultures of the colonized peoples through acts of cultural erasure, relocation, and even religious assimilation. The book *Things Fall Apart* takes place in a Nigerian village that suffered from these cultural harms when the Europeans invaded in the late 19th century. A quote that sums up the general impact states, "And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them,

⁴ Adrienne Edgar, Lecture 9: "European Imperialism", slide 6.

and the whole country became the brown-earth color of the vast, hungry swarm.”⁵ This quote is describing the colonization of the village using symbolism which is trying to show how the Europeans forced a mass cultural and societal change that had everlasting effects on the region. The “locusts” or settlers devoured the region and basically made it their own, neglecting the culture and landscape of those who were native to the land.

When put through so much hardship and suffering, it gets to a point where you feel like something must be done. Imperialism and its detrimental effects created a breeding ground for revolution by the colonized peoples. All the harm creates built up rage and desperation that leaves the colonized with no other choice but to revolt. This can be seen as one way in which the European conquerors were negatively affected themselves by their own acts of imperialism. An interesting concept is how the shared struggle amongst the colonized peoples creates a sort of unity for an uprising. The book *The Wretched of the Earth*, written by a revolutionary in the Algerian independence movement Frantz Fanon, discusses this idea of revolution against colonialism and imperialism. This was an independence movement that ended up being successful when Algeria won the war against France along with their independence in the early 1960s. One topic Fanon focuses on heavily is the concept of violence and how it is necessary for revolution. He describes how violence against colonialism is necessary because it is in response to response, so you can basically look at it as a self-defense tactic. He states that, “...the native’s violence unifies the people. By its very structure, colonialism is separatist and regionalist.”⁶ This goes back to the idea of imperialism destroying cultures in the sense that it tries to separate the natives among themselves. When in reality, they are unified through the shared struggle and find

⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p 48-49.

⁶ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, History 4C Course Reader (Spring 2022), p. 53.

pride in fighting for their freedom from colonial rule. Fanon also says, while talking about violence, “It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”⁷ The colonizer sparks a new feeling that makes the colonized subject realize not only that they no longer want to be a subject, but that they will take matters into their own hands and revolt. And violence is the way that this must be done, when you are trying to fight against violence. The colonizer nations suffer greatly from this because they typically do their “civilizing missions” under the assumption that the “uncivilized” will welcome them and want to thank them for what they bring. Although they do not understand the rage they are creating through their actions that foster strong opposition. The main way the conqueror nations are affected by imperialism is the fault of their own. There is another paradox that exists because the colonizers feel like they need to assert their dominance to almost impress the natives, but in doing this, they only create more protest from the natives who oppose this dominance. In George Orwell’s, “Shooting an Elephant”, he states, “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys...For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the ‘native.’”⁸ This is another instance in which the colonizer makes life more difficult for themselves and sacrifices their own freedoms just to assert a dominance that the natives are ultimately not impressed by, but rather upset by. Imperialism is a disease that spreads amongst all those involved, whether it be the colonizer or colonized.

The age of imperialism was a dangerous time where people were harmed, lives were lost, harmful propaganda and theories were spread, and more. The culture of imperialism was one that tried to justify unwarranted colonization of whole regions and led to the destruction of cultures

⁷ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 53-54.

⁸ George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant”, History 4C Course Reader (Spring 2022), p. 48.

and populations in these regions. The colonized people suffered various types of harms leading to generational trauma among the populations. In committing these acts, the European imperialists brought nothing but harm to not only those they were colonizing, but themselves as well by promoting competition between nations, revolutions by the colonized, and a cultural change that promoted a strong idea of superiority and inferiority that had a significant impact on world developments to this day.