**Week five discussion:  Western Europe---past and present**

**Defining issues: Imperialism and Colonization, and their relationship to globalization**

* **Colonization Case Study: The British Empire**

**Classs 5   Western Europe---past and present**

**Defining issues: Imperialism and Colonization, and their relationship to globalization**

* **Colonization Case Study: The British Empire**

Reading:    Hughes, “The Rise and Fall of the British Empire” <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/article/liverpool.htm>

[(Links to an external site.)](http://www.britishempire.co.uk/article/liverpool.htm)

“Is Britain to blame for many of the world’s problems?” <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-12992540>

[(Links to an external site.)](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-12992540)

“At its peak, the British Empire was the largest formal empire that the world had ever known. As such, its power and influence stretched all over the globe, shaping it in all manner of ways. This site is dedicated to analysing the history of the British Empire: The triumphs, the humiliations, the good that it brought and the bad that it inflicted. For better or worse the British Empire had a massive impact on the history of the world. It is for this reason that this site tries to bring to life the peoples, cultures, adventures and forces that made the Empire such a powerful institution. It is neither an apology for, nor a nostalgic reminiscence of the institution that so dominated the world for over two centuries. Rather, it analyses and describes the vast institution that so influenced the shape of the world that we see today.”

<http://www.britishempire.co.uk/>

[(Links to an external site.)](http://www.britishempire.co.uk/)

“It (the British Empire) is generally divided into two distinct Empires. The First Empire revolved primarily, but not exclusively, around the settler colonies of the Americas. These would be termed the [Thirteen Colonies](http://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/13colonies.htm)

[(Links to an external site.)](http://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/13colonies.htm)

and would gain their independence from Britain in 1783. The Second Empire then developed from the remnants of the First - particularly India - and were added to during the Napoleonic Wars and then throughout the nineteenth century and even into the beginning of the twentieth century. It is this Second, predominantly Victorian, Empire that most people associate with the British Empire.”

Did the British Empire have any benefits for India?

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**Jaipur** (IANS): “How should we view the British Empire and its legacy for its former colonies? Was it one of the world’s greatest modernising forces, as some historians claim, or was it only a destructive bane?



The latter, says Congress politician Shashi Tharoor who maintains the only two benefits for India were cricket and the English language.

Tharoor contested the contentions of co-panellist, British historian, author and MP Tristram Hunt, that the benefits included rule of law and an effective parliamentary system, saying he was not sure how good the latter has been for India.

“The system of governance of a small island nation was sought to be transplanted to a nation where there were not only ideological differences, but a bewildering range of diversities,” he said, at a session titled “Empire” at the Jaipur Literature Festival here on Monday.

On the idea of rule of law, Tharoor contended it was part of the normal evolution of society and India could have achieved it for itself.

“You don’t need foreigners to come and oppress you for benefit of development,” he asserted.

“(Historian) Niall Ferguson (who has termed the British Empire a great modernising force) has not questioned for whose benefit it was done. I only accept cricket and the English language,” said Tharoor.

Hunt, who had stepped in for Ferguson who wasn’t able to make it for the event, contended that there was renewed interest in the Empire in his country — where it had been absent for years from the school curriculum — as Britain took decisions on its place in the world.

The author of “Ten Cities that Made an Empire”, which seeks to chart the changing nature of the British Empire through 10 (formerly) imperial cities spread though out the world, Hunt said the empire had had an influence on his country too — and still has.

“British politics are becoming like Indian politics. The centralised system is shifting to a more federal system… we are willing to take coalition partners,” he said.

On the question of financial compensation for the damages to the former colonies’ social and economic fabric, Tharoor, who had made headlines by making the demand at a debate in Oxford, said it should be a token amount, say a pound for every year of rule, rather than a ridiculous amount as had been calculated and would be “an exercise in absurdity and futility”, could never be paid and besides, “India couldn’t even know what to do with all that money”.

Hunt noted that such a demand was more advanced in the former Caribbean colonies, but they instead of money, had sought help in education and development.

On whether bygones should be bygones, Tharoor said he agreed. “History cannot be undone. But it haunts our past and affects the future. By all means let bygones be bygones, but never forget it… we must remember it.”

Hunt said he agreed. “We must interrogate, analyse and reinterpret the bygones,” he said, adding he was quite skeptical of official apologies for historical wrongs.”

<http://www.mangalorean.com/british-empire-benefits-india/>

[(Links to an external site.)](http://www.mangalorean.com/british-empire-benefits-india/)

This article, however, should be balanced with an article like the one below, which explains both the positives and the negatives of the British Empire:

In retrospect, what were the successes and failures of the British Empire?

[John-Charles Hewitt](https://www.quora.com/profile/John-Charles-Hewitt)

[(Links to an external site.)](https://www.quora.com/profile/John-Charles-Hewitt)

**Successes**

* Pax Brittanica. From the defeat of Napoleon to the outbreak of World War I, Europe enjoyed relative peace. The American hegemony has been much more fraught with international conflict between major powers than the British one was.
* A strong currency that held its value until WWI. This is connected to the Pax Brittanica. After Napoleon's defeat in 1815, Britain adopted the gold standard in 1816 and maintained it until WWI. The pound was the world's reserve currency.
* Spread incredibly powerful technology throughout the world. The industrial revolution would have never happened to the speed and extent to which it did without the English. The importance of this should be emphasized -- the British created the modern pattern of life.
* England abolished slavery in 1833 peacefully. When the American abolitionist movement was really just beginning, the UK had already done away with the peculiar institution.

**Failures**

* The British could have allowed France to lose WWI quickly, saved their culture in the process, ruled the world, and prevented WWII. Instead, their entire male upper class died in the war, as did many others.
* The UK had a needlessly punitive criminal justice system.
* It was silly to draw borders in the Middle East and to meddle in politics there.
* The Opium Wars in China were wasteful. It would've been better to cut the opium traders loose.
* If the Great Famine happened today, the UK would be accused of genocide. This was unnecessary and inhumane.
* The Colonial system was ultimately not necessary. We know this from our modern era of international trade, which exists without colonial governance structures. As Bastiat said of the system: "To me it is a proven fact, and I venture to say a scientifically proven fact, that the colonial system is the most disastrous illusion ever to have led nations astray." [1]

<https://www.quora.com/In-retrospect-what-were-the-successes-and-failures-of-the-British-Empire>

[(Links to an external site.)](https://www.quora.com/In-retrospect-what-were-the-successes-and-failures-of-the-British-Empire)

**An open question would be whether comparisons can be made between the British colonization of India, and the fairly recent incursions by the U.S. ( and coalition forces) in the countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. I do not wish to “politicize” the discussion, but this is a topic that has been considered by both Republicans and Democrats (i.e. what is the difference between “democracy building” in Iraq and colonization? The distinctions are not always clear. Here’s a brief excerpt from another article:**

When Barack Obama claimed the U.S. was “not born as a colonial power,” the **Institute for Public Accuracy** got historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz to respond :

“The United States was founded as a European settler state, with maps and plans already prepared to colonize the continent coast to coast, expanding from the 13 colonies of the founding state. Indeed the U.S. was the first state born as a colonial power, unique in the vast territories it brutally conquered, occupied, and administered, crushing over 300 indigenous nations, force-marching hundreds of thousands east of the Mississippi out of their homelands, crowding them into “Indian Territory” (Oklahoma), along the way annexing half the Republic of Mexico. Plantation agriculture, worked by enslaved Africans, drove U.S. territorial conquests during the first century, creating the economic base for industrial capitalism that would soon dominate the world.”

These are certainly strong words, but should be considered (we’ve already covered some of this material in the discussion on America and the concept of “manifest destiny”).

**The use of the concept in film**

*Avatar* describes the battle by an indigenous people the Na'vi of Pandora, against the oppression of alien humans. Director James Cameron acknowledged that the film is "certainly about imperialism in the sense that the way human history has always worked is that people with more military or technological might tend to supplant or destroy people who are weaker, usually for their resources."



Critics had mixed responses to the film, but one said this:

“Neo-Colonialism In a scholarly essay worthy of Constitutional theorists, Strange Horizon's Roz Kaveney, says Avatar's "central plot structure is a standard neo-colonialist one, in which the Pandorans need the help of a superior being, a white American, to survive and the story is about him, not about them." But unlike many pundits, Kaveney's response is positive:”

“In a post-colonial world, in which we are all dealing with our unconscious assumptions about racism, sexism, imperialism, and capitalism as normative, it is imperative that stories about contacts between cultures be told and inevitable and correct that they will be subject to criticism. These are conversations that need to be had, rather than a set of demands and rules to which creators should sign up. The demand that creators not screw up needs to be the demand that creators try to minimize their screw-ups--and this, I would argue, Cameron has at least endeavoured to do.”

The discussion is based on these articles and ideas---specifically, the incredible impact that the British Empire had on the world at that time, both for good and for ill. The colonial period of the Empire is remembered by many nations today for both reasons, but often in a more negative light (witness Northern Ireland, for example---especially during “The Troubles” (a term referring to ) and the rise of the Irish Republican Army.

To what degree, in your opinion, is this negative response deserved? To the historical events cited and the articles abovce create a clearer understanding of attitudes toward Great Britain today?

Secondly, are there implications for this today? What are the possible lessons learned from the colonialism of the British Empire? What, in your mind, would be a modern example of “neo-colonialism” in the modern world? What have been the results?

Again, please provide documentation for your opinions whenever possible!

JW