

Motives and Consequences of the British Empire

Throughout history, Britain's power and influence has undergone many changes. However perhaps what one thinks of most prominently in this nature is the emergence of the British Empire and Britain's imperialism, beginning in the 16th century. Before it's collapse, the 'commonwealth' made up around a quarter of the globe, and many believed it represented Britain's strength and the success of western institutions. However, in hindsight, it's easier to observe that this was simply not the case. Despite the initial good intentions of the colonisers, aiming for an 'Empire of freedom', we cannot ignore the brutality and racial superiority that occurred during the hundreds of years of Britain's rule. With Africa's states now seriously fragmented and damaged from this control, and social-political breakdowns of civilisations due to forced westernisation, these British liberals may have done more harm than good. Nevertheless, the transfer of ideas and India's democratic developments remain still a very positive effect today. Yet one must question whether colonisation was essential for this cultural exchange to occur – Japan being a strong example of a thriving trading state. In short, colonisation may have had good intentions initially, but it resulted in serious damage.

The colonisation of the globe by Britain was dominated by the competitive nature of conquest. Initially Britain had aims of being an 'Empire of Freedom', rather than the Spanish aims of pillage, however there was an increase in desire to discover their own 'El Dorado'. With determination to emulate the Spanish, for example, Drake copying Cortes, it was simply inevitable that Britain turned to seaborne violence and more materialistic and economic aims in their foreign policy. Historians recognise the unique nature of European colonialism, and, although Britain did always have settler colonialism in mind due to the desire of young men wanting to find riches abroad, the successes of Spain in America and Portugal's strong sea presence turned Britain towards exploitation colonialism. However, Britain lacked the missionary drive that Spain had, perhaps due to the decentralisation of Protestantism in Europe. Therefore to a certain extent, the beliefs of British colonies were not completely influenced. In addition it's important to note that, in Britain's desire for an 'Empire of Freedom', free trade was an aim from very early on. However that wasn't quite the reality. Free trade through open borders and no tariffs wasn't implemented until the mid 19th century, and until that point there was a very formal imperial rule, meaning control and superiority were strong ideals in Britain's Empire – this therefore negates the ideology of an 'Empire of Freedom'. Overall, although there were positive intentions during Britain's colonisation, the nature of European competition caused other aims to become a priority.

As Britain's empire expanded, many issues emerged that are easily observed in hindsight, however a key debate today is whether these issues were cultural or racial. In many ways, the 'liberals' of the period appreciated certain cultures and civilisations – the British saw the ancient art and traditions of China as extremely advanced and certainly not primitive in any

way. Similarly, India was seen very valuable to the crown during Victoria's reign, with a good status before hand. India was seen as the land of spice, wealth and luxury goods, and had a mysterious appeal to the British public. The East India Company's main goal was trade for many years as it had very little toehold around the coastline. In short, India was not seen as a land to be conquered, but in fact a wealthy land to trade with. Warren Hastings had an idea of equality and intermarriage between the two countries, and there was civilisation on both sides, showing British intellectual response to the East. In the mid to late 18th century, there was a much more relaxed attitude to racial difference in India, demonstrating how the concept of racial superiority was not the case in this area of the British Empire. However, it could be argued that this was only because trade and politics was already strongly interlinked and involved among Indians, and therefore Britain saw them as an equal culture. Yet there is strong evidence that Western institutions were still being forced upon them and causing serious issues, such as the Indian mutiny.

The Indian Mutiny is a very important example of Britain's influence causing problems, as we can observe that, rather than being caused by one single factor, it was caused by the accumulation of numerous factors in India. For years under Warren Hastings, religious policy in India had been respected to avoid social friction – for example, during the rapid expansion of the army, newly recruited soldiers dined separately from sepoy officers and Hindu festivals were widely recognised. This is supported by Eric Stokes who wrote that 'the British scrupulously avoided interference with the social structure of the village community which remained largely intact'. However, in the mid 19th century it seemed as if the East India Company were encouraging mass conversions to Christianity, and soldiers were now expected to serve in less familiar regions without the 'foreign service' remuneration, which caused widespread resentment. However the two largest factors that contributed to the rebellion was the General Service Enlistment Act of 25 July 1856, and the introduction of the Enfield Rifle. Lord Canning prevented sons following fathers into an army with a strong tradition of family service through his act, as soldiers had to accept a commitment for general service due to requirement overseas. Furthermore there were less opportunities for Indian soldiers to rise up the ranks and become more senior in the army, as European soldiers were increasing in numbers and were prioritised, reflecting an idea of racial superiority from the British during their colonisation of India, and this of course resulted in resentment from the native soldiers. However the introduction of the Enfield rifle was an example of the British interfering with religion – the pre-greased paper cartridges that came with these new rifles needed to be bitten to be opened, and this was offensive to both Hindus and Muslims, as the grease included tallow, from beef, and a lard derived from pork. When reflecting on these actions from the British army, it is clear that the previously relatively relaxed attitude to racial difference was absent. With religious, cultural and racial discrimination, one cannot dispute that there was an extreme lack of respect from the colonisers, and therefore this initial liberal and 'free' approach was not achieved.

Indeed, in areas such as Jamaica and Africa, there was no initial cultural appreciation in the slightest. Many historians think of the concept of the 'noble savage' in this context, however there is evidence that that was not the case, as the British colonisers didn't believe their civilisations were primitive in a positive way. There was a particular sense of cultural

superiority from Britain in the Caribbean demonstrating how there was never one simple notion of race across the Empire and the colonisers' relationship with those colonised was in fact very complicated. Nevertheless despite debate the treatment of Jamaicans both in the run up to the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865 and in general was brutal and derived from racism. The rebellion took place in the wake of emancipation that had taken place in 1834 to 1838 where the freedoms brought about were not what was expected, and there was serious resentment of the power of the plantocracy. Prior to the rebellion, only 2000 black men could vote despite outnumbering white colonisers 32:1. Furthermore Jamaica had experienced serious flooding and plagues, ruining crops and causing many fatalities. This worsened the economic conditions for populations of Jamaicans who were former slaves, and as a result there was increased tension between these families and farmers. However, after Jamaica's governor John Eyre forwarded a letter from the poor to Queen Victoria, her response was simply an encouragement for the poor to work harder in order to improve their conditions. The black Baptist Paul Bogle was refused a meeting with Eyre to discuss issues further, and resentment continued to grow. The breaking point for the Jamaican population was the trial against a black man on 7 October 1865 for trespassing on a long abandoned sugar plantation, and after disruptions from protestors a fight broke out at the courthouse, leading to the rebellion. These rebellions in Jamaica and India both demonstrate how there were a series of issues that built up and were not resolved, and therefore it was the treatment from the British that caused the outbreaks of violence. However, the Morant Bay rebellion was immediately interpreted as a racial war and this led to extermination and massacre, with even more brutal treatment of the Jamaican people.

Despite this racial discrimination, there is evidence to show that the British public, particularly the 'liberals' at the time, opposed this and had a very different attitude to the British Empire. After news of the response reached England, people debated the meaning of the rebellion and to what extent the resulting repression had been legitimate. People were now interested in how the British were conducting themselves in the colonies, and it became a major divisive political issue, demonstrating how the intentions of Britain throughout its Empire were positive and fair; there was just in fact serious corruption in the armed forces.

However, despite evidence of appreciation of other cultures, many believed that they required westernisation in order to progress. Although there was always a conservative desire to preserve stability, and this was emphasised even more after the rebellions during the 19th century, there were still huge waves of economic innovation taking place across the British Empire. This was particularly problematic because the difference in technology between the Western world and the colonised states during the 17th and 18th century was relatively small, therefore there could have been a possibility that these civilisations would have developed on their own without western interference- however they were never given a chance. Japan is an example of this; it became a flourishing state with successful trade and a complex series of institutions. This could be opposed as an argument though, as a trade deal with the West was almost forced upon Japan by American Commodore Matthew Perry. Therefore this could validate the argument that the transfer of trade and ideas was only possible through colonisation or forced deals. Gladstone argues that 'the British were not

superior in terms of a mental capacity or their artistic accomplishments, but they had the energy to enable change and progress', supporting the argument that the developed complexity and modernisation of these states was only possible due to British intervention. Nevertheless, the lack of opportunity for these 'primitive' civilisations to develop independently asks the question of whether an industrial revolution would have eventually reached them, albeit later than Britain.

The consequences of the British Empire are still very present in today's society. Although many argue that the British Empire is responsible for India's successful democracy, the fragmentation of African states is largely due to Britain's colonisation. The whole of Europe projected its idea of 'undiluted state sovereignty' on the rest of the world and it has caused great crises. The states in Africa, imposed by Europeans, has been greatly damaging due to the lack of history of Empire, unlike India. Nevertheless, the early patterns of globalisation have been hugely important for today's society. It's possible for the argument to work both ways – of course many believe that Britain was necessary for the enlightenment of other states, but it also could be argued that exposure to these other cultures helped Britain itself to develop. We must never forget however, that the relationship between 'colonised' and 'coloniser' was central throughout the history of the British Empire, and despite some evidence of collaboration the attitude towards other races remains generally negative.

To conclude, although there was an intended 'Empire of Freedom', it was not achieved. There was clear evidence of brutality and racial superiority, and although there was some respect towards other cultures, the intervention with Western institutions badly damaged the social structure of many colonies. Despite the transfer of ideas creating a new 'fertile way of thinking' for both the states colonised and Europe, the important debate of whether colonisation was essential for this still remains.