The Causes and Consequences of Ecological Imperialism
Curtin, T. 1997

Abstract

A major element of globalisation today has its roots in the capitalist growth into new markets in the nineteenth century. Although ostensibly driven by a drying up of investment opportunities in the industrialised countries of northern Europe, it may not have been inevitable. The view of one historian holds that it made more economic sense for these countries to broaden wealth distribution through increased trade with each other. History records that colonial imperialist expansion spread the culture of capitalism across the globe. Along with it went a plague of alien plant and animal species, accompanied by the forced conversion of indigenous environments to production values. Some formed a resistance to this invasion and survived. Most did not. The countries on the receiving end, however, are the same ones who now suggest that expediency in matters of development must override those concerning the physical environment. We in the industrialised world should not be surprised.

Key words: ecological imperialism, capitalism, colonialism, acclimatisation societies.

Introduction

Ecological imperialism as a process can be viewed as a legacy of the globalisation of capitalism. Land, labour and capital are fundamental requirements of the capitalist system of production. Of these, 'land' is the expression for the naturally occurring, non-human resources which are considered as 'gifts of nature' (McTaggart, Findlay & Parkin 1995, p. 46). Evidence of the process of land conversion for capital resource inputs can be found in the sixteenth century drainage of England's wetlands and destruction of forests (Johnston 1996, p. 102). History has recorded variations of the immediate impact of certain forms of what we now, in hindsight, would determine as specific examples of the process. A modern definition might allude to the ongoing extension of capitalist mechanisms to the underdeveloped world by wealthy industrialised nations, through the imposition of productive processes. Such processes are primarily unconcerned with suitability to, or sustainability of, local ecological systems and cultural heritage.

The progenitor of ecological imperialism was capitalist imperialism, which manifested in the nineteenth century colonial acquisitions by, predominantly, European powers looking beyond declining domestic investment opportunities (Zeitlin 1972, p. 71). Colonialism is historically documented as the pinnacle of imperialist expansion of capitalist markets (Lenin 1951, pp. 99-100). However, a counter argument to its inevitability has existed since the end of the colonial period (Hobson 1968, p. 87). The ongoing imperialist aspect of the process is featured in the distanciation centred on the latest communication and information technology (Hay 1997a). Legacies of ecological imperialism range from damage by alien land use...
practices to the decimation of indigenous species, including humans (Rolls 1969, p. 18). However, if the issue of capitalist imperialism had more than one side to its argument at the time of colonial expansion, might not the same situation apply to the forces that might be labelled 'ecological imperialism' today?

The Implications of Competition under Capitalism

The Marketplace

In the simple analogy of a typical marketplace, there are a number of sellers attempting to garner the largest market possible for their produce, as a return on the investment for setting up the business. They are all aware that their market is defined by certain demographic constraints and, because of this, the market can only expand until a saturation point is reached. At this point three alternatives are available; steal other sellers' customers while protecting your own, find a new marketplace, or get out of the selling business. When the sellers are large businesses and wealthy individuals with multiple investment options, not investing is not an option. In the first instance, therefore, the choice is to make a bid for other vendors' businesses.

The Conventional View

Using England as an example, while it had an industrial advantage due to inventions of the Industrial Revolution, it was free from serious competition. (Fieldhouse 1967, p. 168) However, by the middle of the 1880s, Germany, France, the United States and other powers had begun to draw level with English industrial capacity (Fieldhouse 1967, p. 168). The 'new imperialism' of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century was highlighted by fierce competition between rival nation-states and was typified by nationalistic aggressiveness for each others' markets while adopting protectionist measures for their own (Zeitlin 1972, pp. 66-67; Fieldhouse 1967, p. 168). Such intense competition quickly saturated markets and limited investment opportunities in one's own country (Fieldhouse 1967, p. 168). Europe and the United States were preoccupied with the continued accumulation of capital as a means of securing future investment returns (Fieldhouse 1973, p. 38). The conventional view, as expressed by Lenin, suggested this be achieved through exploitation of the cheap non-European labour and materials in other parts of the world (Fieldhouse 1973, p. 39). The future colonial re-divisioning was so sought after that it was a significant motive for two world wars (Fieldhouse 1973, p. 39). However, Hobson argued that all this was not historically inevitable (Hobson 1968, p. 85).

Colonial Imperialism

If the conventional argument held true, then Great Britain, as the largest empire of the period (Hobson 1968, p. 369), should have shown a marked increase in trade (especially exports) with its colonies over the last half of the nineteenth century. As Table 1 below shows, this is clearly not the case; imports actually diminished and exports, although showing a 5.5 per cent rise, are offset by a decrease of exactly the same amount in exports to foreign countries. Hobson argued that the foreign countries which were its closest competitors should be the more desirable target for exports.
since those markets are conducive to mutual advancement in areas other than economics (Hobson 1968, p. 66).

**Table 1: Merchandise trade between Great Britain and the rest of the world 1855-1903.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Averages</th>
<th>Imports into Great Britain from</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign Countries</td>
<td>British Possessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign Countries</td>
<td>British Possessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855-1859</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860-1864</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865-1869</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>24.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1870-1874</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1875-1879</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>22.1</td>
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<td>1880-1884</td>
<td>76.5</td>
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<td>1885-1889</td>
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<td>1890-1894</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1895-1899</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1903</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**An Alternative View**

Hobson suggests that the very excess of savings over consumption, necessitating the seeking of markets outside one's own country, is a sign of an economy out of balance; in a healthy economy "the growing wants of progressive societies would be a constant stimulus to the inventive and operative energies of producers..." (Hobson 1968, p. 87). Any excess of savings should be reinvested in the future consumption power of individuals by income re-distribution. He considers the struggle for newer and newer markets are for the benefit of a relatively few politically powerful and influential investors. This takes precedence over consumer-driven stimuli, which have a greater chance to benefit a whole nation (Hobson 1968, p. 88). Hobson's view of socialist
capitalism might support criticism of the culturally intrusive nature of television product advertising in underdeveloped countries today.

Some Consequences of Colonialism

With European settlement came European ideas, practices, plants and animals. The records of the First Fleet to Australia in 1788 include horses, cows, sheep, goats, geese, ducks and rabbits (Rolls 1969, pp 7-8). Of all the introduced animals, colonial settlers could never have foreseen the impact which rabbits would have on the ecological balance of Australia and New Zealand. Had they known, they would not have continued to bring them from Great Britain on subsequent journeys nor release them on coastal islands as a food source should marooning occur (Rolls 1969, pp 15). Rabbits were initially difficult to breed in numbers in the wild due to preying by native cats, dingoes, eagles and goannas (Rolls 1969, p. 18). In a bizarre turnaround to modern times, settlers began using strychnine to poison all manner of native 'pests' so that the rabbit could thrive (Rolls 1969, p. 18). The category of undesirable native species extended as far as Indigenous Australians, who were also dealt with by a judicious use of the poison, as an alternative to the potentially more troublesome justification of shooting (Rolls 1969, pp 18-19).

The attempt by settlers to transplant their mother country to the new colonial frontier was epitomised by the Acclimatisation Societies of Australia and New Zealand. The stated aim of the New South Wales society of 1864 was "spreading over the length and breadth of the land inestimable acquisitions to the wealth and comfort of the people" (Rolls 1969, p. 217). Lack of biological knowledge meant that it was difficult to assess which animals would be harmful and which safe, and some of the effects of acclimatisation could not be foreseen. Such was the case when a list of animals sent from Victoria to New Zealand in 1863 included "4 opposums" (Rolls 1969, p. 218). Until 1946 possums were protected in New Zealand since their fur was valuable (Rolls 1969, p. 218). In recent years, and with no natural predators, a million or more possums have been poisoned annually with little reduction in their numbers. They have wreaked disaster on New Zealand forests that have never been subject to leaf-eating mammals (Rolls 1969, p. 219). Although zoological societies were set up in the colonies, the distinction between them and acclimatisation societies was clear. The Victorian Governor in 1863 is quoted as having said; "If the real object of an acclimatization society were carried out, not a single creature would remain in our charge, for they would all be dispersed about the country" (Rolls 1969, p. 217). Attempts by the New South Wales Acclimatisation Society to breed cochineal insects for red dye only succeeded in introducing its host plant, the prickly pear (Rolls 1969, p. 269). Fortunately, the life of acclimatisation societies was short and most was eventually amalgamated with zoological societies (Rolls 1969, p. 272). Their legacy can still be found throughout Australia in the starling and the sparrow, and in the Murray-Darling river system with the European carp (Rolls 1969, p. 275).

The imposition of new forms of land designation, specifically for the production of foodstuffs and merchandise for European markets, had an oppressive impact on indigenous cultural connections with the land (Grove 1990, p. 16). They were not without some measure of resistance, however. An example of cultural legacy and
persistence can be found in the Maori of New Zealand. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed between the British Crown and Maori chiefs in 1840, sought to preserve native cultural values in the face of European colonial domination. Through a quirk of the absence of a written Maori language, two versions of the treaty existed, one for each party. Although the pakeha version was acted upon in a colonial manner akin to that of Australia, the Maori version has only recently been proven to have had equal validity. In the space of thirteen years since its validation, the definition of resources has been reverting back to Maori expressions of value (Hay 1997b).

Grove (1990, p. 16) makes reference to a hardy form of peasant 'resistance' which survived colonial domination and influenced the evolution of uniquely local ecological, conservation structures. He suggests that it may have been the uncertainty of the long term survival of new colonies which caused the settlers to be more cognisant of indigenous conservation customs than documented history has recorded, especially in Western India and West Africa (Grove 1990, pp. 17-18). In essence, he believes some colonial states achieved reduced resource degradation through resistance to an unbridled capitalist regime, and that this legacy is evident in current scepticism by these still-developing countries toward global ecological plans emanating from the same powers as a hundred or more years ago (Grove 1990, p. 42).

The Consequences Today

The time/space compression, which today is fundamental to distanciation, utilises capitalist mechanisms as its basis for 'shrinking' the world to fit global markets. The ongoing refinement of communications and transport technologies has a major role to play in this regard; if one can minimise the effects of space, one can increase the size of markets and the realm of production. This is imperative to the capitalist system where success is measured by the turnover time of investment capital. The implications for the social processes and associated environmental damage accompanying such trends may well be measured in commensurate, accelerated 'spikes' of activity, too rapid and haphazard to be adequately foreseen (Hay 1997a).

Conclusion

Imperialism and colonial expansion was resisted by indigenous rural communities, mainly expressed in a cultural context. Conformity was imposed through inclusion, exclusion, coercion, marginalisation, and even genocide. The relentless presence of, and pressure to accommodate capitalist practices in underdeveloped countries, has taken its toll of cultural, and thereby in great measure, ecological resistance. Yet, developing countries that were once colonies have long memories. Ecological imperialist behaviour of the past may have become the model for the underdeveloped world's development strategies - 'you evolved your productive system by trial and error, and expediency; now we're going to do the same!' The cynicism of the developing world regarding so-called global environmental problems may not be that new. Hobson's view on the avoidability of imperialism, by distributing the share of capitalist prosperity more equitably to a larger mass of consumers (Hobson 1968, p.
88), may now be placed in the modern context. The argument that unbridled levels of resource consumption by the industrialised countries is a key environmental factor may have a valid historic basis while the social divisiveness of poverty is endemic throughout the less-developed countries of the world.

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