

There is No “Case for Colonialism”: insights from the colonial economic history.

Yannick Dupraz and Valeria Rueda discuss why colonialism is not a development policy to be judged on the basis of a careful cost-benefit analysis.

Third World Quarterly recently published a paper in which Bruce Gilley, a political scientist, argues in favour of a modern and improved colonialism. Internally, its argument is profoundly inconsistent, and [Sahar Khan already had the patience to point out](#) to a long list of historical inaccuracies and misuse of academic references. In a larger perspective, the article has produced two different kinds of responses. The first type points at the vast Political Science and Economics literature showing the negative long-term consequences of colonisation. Brandon Kendhammer’s [piece in the Washington Post](#) follows this lead. The second type focuses on the colonial powers’ atrocious crimes, which mirrored the inherent racism of the colonial enterprise. [Nathan J. Robinson’s excellent post in Current Affairs](#) has a few shocking pictures and should be read by anyone wanting to be better informed.

Despite Dr Gilley’s whining, colonialism does not have the bad name one would expect such a violent period to have. France is a good example of a country where mentioning the crimes of colonialism is [actually difficult for a politician](#). For this reason, although both types of responses are needed, the second type is more suitable to a paper whose goal is to make of European colonialism a pure issue of economic policy, sweeping under the rug the racism and violence from which they cannot be detached.

As economists studying the way development was shaped by various colonial policies, we want to make clear that our job is not to tally the good and bad points of colonisation in a sinister accounting exercise featuring smallpox vaccination campaigns in one columns, forced labour and torture in the other. A better understanding of our research clarifies why European colonialism is not, like the minimum wage or anti-trust regulations, a development policy to be judged on the basis of a careful cost-benefit analysis.



In 1925, the *Presse coloniale illustrée* praised the “civilising work” of France in the Congo. An estimated 20,000 forced labourers died in the construction of the Congo-Océan railway depicted here. Hundreds of kilometers of forest were also cut down. Photo Credit: La Presse Coloniale Française, oct. 1925 gallica.bnf.fr / BnF

There is a prolific recent literature that has looked at historical events in previously colonised areas, quantifying their long-lasting effects on contemporary development outcomes. In 2010, [Melissa Dell](#) showed that the regional differences in income and consumption in contemporary Peru can be partially attributed to the negative effects of 250 years of forced labour imposed by the Spanish Crown. Nathan Nunn is well known for his study of the [long-lasting effects of slavery](#) on contemporary development, while Stelios Michalopoulos and Elias Papaioannou recently documented the [increased level of conflict due to the partition of ethnic groups](#) during the scramble for Africa.

In that same line of publications, other economists study colonial investments and their long-term effects. In 2009, Elise Huillery showed that in former French West Africa, regions where colonial investments in education were higher still have more schools. Similarly, Remi Jedwab and Alexander Moradi document the extent to which [colonial-era railway construction explains inequalities](#) in African urbanisation. Denis Cogneau and Alexander Moradi compare British and French Togo to show that [literacy increased considerably faster in the British part](#), a difference that persisted after independence.

It follows that there are positive and negative effects of policies that happened *during the colonial times*. However, any extrapolation of effects to evaluate *colonialism* relies on a wrong interpretation. The reason is that economists never compare colonised regions to non-colonised ones. For example, Elise Huillery compares regions of French West Africa where colonial investments were low with regions where colonial investments were higher. In both cases, the regions were colonised. She can then infer something about the persistent effects of education investments on long term development *given the colonial past*, but nowhere does she claim that investments would have been lower or higher in a scenario without European colonisation.

In fact, European colonialism was so widespread, that finding a counterfactual for colonization is quasi-absurd. Picking a place with no European settlers is no counterfactual for colonisation because colonisation was more than the presence of Europeans. It was the way everything was organised, from local economies, to the international trade and finance. Therefore, any exercise aimed at measuring the effects of *colonialism* relies on the construction of artificial, shaky, comparison points. Even [Heldring and Robinson's most rigorous attempt](#) acknowledges the imprecision of the exercise before concluding that the evidence suggests that the colonial enterprise significantly hindered African development.

Why exactly are then economists studying colonial policies? First, because knowledge of long-term patterns in development and inequalities is important in devising economic policies. Identifying the source inequalities is the first step towards reducing them. The second reason is more technical. Precisely because of its arbitrary and violent nature, colonialism is a producer of "natural experiments": policy variations that are almost random. Since most colonial rulers did not take the local context into account, a large number of colonial policies were arbitrary. For example, while European railways were built with the aim of connecting local markets, in Africa, they were built to connect primary resources with a port in the shortest way. While rail access resulted from complicated local negotiations in European towns, African towns that happened to be in the shortest path between a mine and a port were the ones who got the access. We can evaluate the consequences of these natural experiments, but the answer will never tell us something about colonialism because the towns that accessed the rail line and the ones that did not were all colonised. Instead, the answer tells us something about when and why infrastructure and market access affect development in the long-term.

But let's not be naïve. The approach of economics is universalist and positivist. It is rooted in the belief that some development policies work better than others, and can be evaluated rigorously. Although this is slowly changing, research in economics is mostly carried out in Western universities, in research institutes that often have a colonial ancestor. For this reason, as development economists and economic historians, we are aware of the risk of developing a neo-colonial agenda seeking to impose what we believe to be good economic policies. The risk relies exactly on imposing a policy; colonialism is a package that cannot be stripped off its violence, and its history teaches us that imposing rules in foreign territories is bound to fail. Any idea that the colonial “toolkit” would be different today because we know better forgets that the kind of violence that States exerted in colonised areas could not have happened in Europe at that time. France in the 1920s was a parliamentary democracy whose government would vote the most progressive workers’ rights in history just a decade later; and yet, [an estimated 20,000 forced labourers died in the construction of the Congo-Océan railway in French Congo in the 1920s](#). Hundreds of thousands of people died during the independence wars in Algeria, Indochina, and [Cameroon](#) a just little bit more than 50 years ago.

When someone tries to make the kind of arguments of which “The case for colonialism” is a caricature, our first instinct is to carefully discuss the various mechanisms through which colonial legacies are bad for development. But an article making the case for colonialism without mentioning its inherent racism and violence is just starting with the wrong premise.

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