
Colonization and the role of agriculture in a nutshell

From the 15th century onwards, technological progress enabled Europe to take an enormous lead in charting the whole world through the invasion of the American continent, the almost total annihilation of the native population, and the unrestricted take-over of political and economic power.

America's economy was restructured and oriented according to European requirements. A diverse agriculture was replaced by a system of large plantations to grow sugar, cotton and tobacco for the European market, under a monoculture system which was usually harmful to the soils after repeated use and left the countries vulnerable to plant diseases sweeping through the entire crop. Local biodiversity was degraded or lost and forests were cleared.

The American plantations were based on the exploitation of enslaved African people which made of Africa an annex to America, with the function of providing the continent's slave labour. Some hundred million African people were savagely chased for that purpose.

In the 19th century, the large scale single-crop farming that had been introduced in America was also imposed in Africa by the Europeans, along the same basis: to provide goods inexpensively to the European markets.

Sugar cane, tobacco, cotton, tea, rice and coffee were some of the main products grown in the colonies, which paradoxically had to begin importing food since cash crops generally took a majority of the available farmland, sometimes up to 80%.

Sugar cane required a heavy input of labour (originally slaves). Grown in monocropping, it depleted the soil quickly. By 1700, Brazil was the main sugar producing area in the world, and most of the West Indies became largely sugar cane plantations.

Tobacco was originally grown on small farms, later on in large plantations with slaves. Also cotton was a key raw material for the Industrial Revolution, which was originally focused on the textile industry, particularly cotton goods. Most cotton was grown on plantations. Like sugar and tobacco, it depleted the soil quickly.

Tea as a cash crop came to dominate the economies of south-east Asia. In India, tea plantations were established on the hills of Assam province by clearing the forests.

Rice had been grown by peasants in south-east Asia for their own use or for trade in local markets, for centuries before European control was established. Britain annexed Burma in 1852 and established extensive rice paddies to produce rice for export to Britain (the area under rice cultivation there increased 20 times between 1855 and 1920). Also the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 meant that crops from Asia were easier to transport. France occupied Indo-China in 1861 and brought about similar transformations. In both Burma and Indo China, large plantations drove out the small landowners and left the sharecroppers permanently in debt.

Coffee is indigenous to Africa, but it was first grown as a cash crop in Ceylon in the late 17th century, and later in Java. After a coffee blight broke out in the 1870s, production in south-east Asia fell. Brazil stepped in and became the main supplier in the world. As large coffee plantations exhausted quickly the soils, new fields were opened up as the railways penetrated deeper in the forest in the 19th century.

The independence of American and later African states did not mean a change in the economic and social structure. Agricultural, trading, and land-ownership patterns set during the colonial period persisted. Diversification proved very difficult, so newly independent colonies simply tried to produce more of the cash crops they had already been producing. This resulted in even greater dependence on the same commodities and a general response of finding even more products to export for cash. Newly born local elites also helped to maintain commercial dependence which was in general reinforced by economic and financial treaties with the former colonial powers and/or following successors.

In the early phases of Western imperialism, Asia wanted nothing that Europe offered. European powers could interpose themselves only as brokers of the common items of Asian trade. However, European colonialism transformed the landscape of Southeast Asia and the lives and livelihoods of its peoples, as it regularized, fenced and atomized the region in entirely new and foreign ways diminishing its shared identity. Between about 1870 and the early years of the twentieth century, European colonialism created a whole new state system in Southeast Asia.

The coffee production and trade of the Dutch East Indies company from the early eighteenth century on thronged the hills of West Java with imported coffee trees and carried off the produce for sale in Europe. Similarly, the Spanish in the Philippines sought to establish a monopoly over the production and marketing of tobacco in specified parts of Luzon for nearly a hundred years from the late eighteenth century on. From the 1830s, the Dutch forced Javanese peasants in their millions to grow huge quantities of coffee, sugar, indigo and other tropical products for export and sale in Europe.

The export-oriented monoculture productive pattern imposed by the colonial system –in the past as in the present-- has been at the expense of the people and the ecosystems, mainly the forests. Those cultures who had lived in close contact with nature had developed quite a balanced relationship with their environment, which could be a referent to follow. But old and later new colonization put a wedge that made the global world enter into the present blind alley.

Article based on information from: "The Third World",
<http://www.yorku.ca/bwall/nats1840/lecturesx4/4x11thirdworld.pdf> ; "Reinventing a Region: Southeast Asia and the Colonial Experience", Robert Elson,
<http://www.palgrave.com/pdfs/1403934762.pdf>