

Year 501



# Year 501

The Conquest Continues

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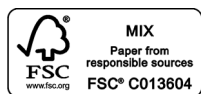
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# “The Great Work of Subjugation and Conquest”

The year 1992 poses a critical moral and cultural challenge for the more privileged sectors of the world-dominant societies. The challenge is heightened by the fact that within these societies, notably the first European colony liberated from imperial rule, popular struggle over many centuries has achieved a large measure of freedom, opening many opportunities for independent thought and committed action. How this challenge is addressed in the years to come will have fateful consequences.

October 11, 1992 brings to an end the 500th year of the Old World Order, sometimes called the Colombian era of world history, or the Vasco da Gama era, depending on which adventurers bent on plunder got there first. Or “the 500-year Reich,” to borrow the title of a commemorative volume that compares the methods and ideology of the Nazis with those of the European invaders who subjugated most of the world.<sup>1</sup> The major theme of this Old World Order was a confrontation between the conquerors and the conquered on a global scale. It has taken various forms, and been given different names: imperialism, neocolonialism, the North-South conflict, core versus periphery, G-7 (the 7



leading state capitalist industrial societies) and their satellites versus the rest. Or, more simply, Europe's conquest of the world.

By the term "Europe," we include the European-settled colonies, one of which now leads the crusade; in accord with South African conventions, the Japanese are admitted as "honorary whites," rich enough to (almost) qualify. Japan was one of the few parts of the South to escape conquest and, perhaps not coincidentally, to join the core, with some of its former colonies in its wake. That there may be more than coincidence in the correlation of independence and development is suggested further by a look at Western Europe, where parts that were colonized followed something like the Third World path. One notable example is Ireland, violently conquered, then barred from development by the "free trade" doctrines selectively applied to ensure subordination of the South—today called "structural adjustment," "neoliberalism," or "our noble ideals," from which we, to be sure, are exempt.<sup>2</sup>

"The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind," Adam Smith wrote in 1776: "What benefits, or what misfortunes to mankind may hereafter result from those great events, no human wisdom can foresee." But it was possible for an honest eye to see what had taken place. "The discovery of America...certainly made a most essential" contribution to the "state of Europe," Smith wrote, "opening up a new and inexhaustible market" that led to vast expansion of "productive powers" and "real revenue and wealth." In theory, the "new set of exchanges...should naturally have proved as advantageous to the new, as it certainly did to the old continent." That was not to be, however.

"The savage injustice of the Europeans rendered an event, which ought to have been beneficial to all, ruinous and destructive to several of those unfortunate countries," Smith wrote, re-

vealing himself to be an early practitioner of the crime of "political correctness," to borrow some rhetoric of contemporary cultural management. "To the natives...both of the East and West Indies," Smith continued, "all the commercial benefits, which can have resulted from those events have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned." With "the superiority of force" the Europeans commanded, "they were enabled to commit with impunity every sort of injustice in those remote countries."

Smith does not mention the indigenous inhabitants of North America: "There were but two nations in America, in any respect superior to savages [Peru, Mexico], and these were destroyed almost as soon as discovered. The rest were mere savages"—a convenient idea for the British conquerors, hence one that was to persist, even in scholarship, until the cultural awakening of the 1960s finally opened many eyes.

Over half a century later, Hegel discoursed authoritatively on the same topics in his lectures on philosophy of history, brimming with confidence as we approach the final "phase of World-History," when Spirit reaches "its full maturity and *strength*" in "the *German* world." Speaking from that lofty peak, he relates that native America was "physically and psychologically powerless," its culture so limited that it "must expire as soon as Spirit approached it." Hence "the aborigines...gradually vanished at the breath of European activity." "A mild and passionless disposition, want of spirit, and a crouching submissiveness...are the chief characteristics of the native Americans," so "slothful" that, under the kind "authority of the Friars," "at midnight a bell had to remind them even of their matrimonial duties." They were inferior even to the Negro, "the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state," who is beyond any "thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling"; there is "nothing harmonious with humanity...in this type of character." "Among the Negroes

moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking nonexistent." "Parents sell their children, and conversely children their parents, as either has the opportunity," and "The polygamy of the Negroes has frequently for its object the having many children, to be sold, every one of them, into slavery." Creatures at the level of "a mere Thing—an object of no value," they treat "as enemies" those who seek to abolish slavery, which has "been the occasion of the increase of human feeling among the Negroes," enabling them to become "participant in a higher morality and the culture connected with it."

The conquest of the New World set off two vast demographic catastrophes, unparalleled in history: the virtual destruction of the indigenous population of the Western hemisphere, and the devastation of Africa as the slave trade rapidly expanded to serve the needs of the conquerors, and the continent itself was subjugated. Much of Asia too suffered "dreadful misfortunes." While modalities have changed, the fundamental themes of the conquest retain their vitality and resilience, and will continue to do so until the reality and causes of the "savage injustice" are honestly addressed.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. "The Savage Injustice of the Europeans"

The Spanish-Portuguese conquests had their domestic counterpart. In 1492, the Jewish community of Spain was expelled or forced to convert. Millions of Moors suffered the same fate. The fall of Granada in 1492, ending eight centuries of Moorish sovereignty, allowed the Spanish Inquisition to extend its barbaric sway. The conquerors destroyed priceless books and manuscripts with their rich record of classical learning, and demolished the civilization that had flourished under the far more tolerant and cultured Moorish rule. The stage was set for the decline of Spain, and also for the racism and savagery of the world conquest—"the curse of Columbus," in the words of Africa historian Basil Davidson.<sup>4</sup>

Spain and Portugal were soon displaced from their leading role. The first major competitor was Holland, with more capital than its rivals thanks in large part to the control of the Baltic trade that it had won in the 16th century and was able to maintain by force. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), formed in 1602, was granted virtually the powers of a state, including the right to make war and treaties. Technically, it was an independent enterprise, but that was an illusion. "The apparent autonomy from metropolitan political control that the VOC enjoyed," M.N. Pearson writes, resulted from the fact that "the VOC was identical with the state," itself controlled by Dutch merchants and financiers. In highly simplified form, we see already something of the structure of the modern political economy, dominated by a network of transnational financial and industrial institutions with internally managed investment and trade, their wealth and influence established and maintained by the state power that they mobilize and largely control.

"The VOC integrated the functions of a sovereign power with the functions of a business partnership," a historian of Dutch capitalism writes: "Political decisions and business decisions were made within the same hierarchy of company managers and officials, and failure or success was always in the last instance measured in terms of profit." The Dutch established positions of strength in Indonesia (to remain a Dutch colony until the 1940s), India, Brazil and the Caribbean, took Sri Lanka from Portugal, and reached to the fringes of Japan and China. The Netherlands, however, fell victim to what was later called "the Dutch disease": inadequate central state power, which left the people "rich perhaps, as individuals; but weak, as a State," as Britain's Lord Sheffield observed in the 18th century, warning the British against the same error.<sup>5</sup>

The Iberian empires suffered further blows as English pirates, marauders and slave traders swept the seas, perhaps the most no-

torious, Sir Francis Drake. The booty that Drake brought home “may fairly be considered the fountain and origin of British foreign investments,” John Maynard Keynes wrote: “Elizabeth paid out of the proceeds the whole of her foreign debt and invested a part of the balance...in the Levant Company; largely out of the profits of the Levant Company there formed the East India Company, the profits of which...were the main foundations of England’s foreign connections.” In the Atlantic, the entire English operation prior to 1630 was a “predatory drive of armed traders and marauders to win by fair means or foul a share of the Atlantic wealth of the Iberian nations” (Kenneth Andrews). The adventurers who laid the basis for the merchant empires of the 17th-18th centuries “continued a long European tradition of the union of warfare and trade,” Thomas Brady adds, as “the European state’s growth as a military enterprise” gave rise to “the quintessentially European figure of the warrior-merchant.” Later, the newly consolidated English state took over the task of “wars for markets” from “the plunder raids of Elizabethan sea-dogs” (Christopher Hill). The British East India Company was granted its charter in 1600, extended indefinitely in 1609, providing the Company with a monopoly over trade with the East on the authority of the British Crown. There followed brutal wars, frequently conducted with unspeakable barbarism, among the European rivals, drawing in native populations that were often caught up in their own internal struggles. In 1622, Britain drove the Portuguese from the straits of Hormuz, “the key of all India,” and ultimately won that great prize. Much of the rest of the world was ultimately parcelled out in a manner that is well known.

Rising state power had enabled England to subdue its own Celtic periphery, then to apply the newly honed techniques with even greater savagery to new victims across the Atlantic. Their contempt for “the dirty, cowkeeping Celts on [England’s] fringes” also eased the way for “civilised and prosperous Englishmen” to

take a commanding position in the slave trade as “the gradient of contempt...spread its shadow from nearby hearts of darkness to those far over the sea,” Thomas Brady writes.

From mid-17th century, England was powerful enough to impose the Navigation Acts (1651, 1662), barring foreign traders from its colonies and giving British shipping “the monopoly of the trade of their own country” (imports), either “by absolute prohibitions” or “heavy burdens” on others (Adam Smith, who reviews these measures with mixed reservations and approval). The “twin goals” of these initiatives were “strategic power and economic wealth through shipping and colonial monopoly,” the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* relates. Britain’s goal in the Anglo-Dutch wars from 1652 to 1674 was to restrict or destroy Dutch trade and shipping and gain control over the lucrative slave trade. The focus was the Atlantic, where the colonies of the New World offered enormous riches. The Acts and wars expanded the trading areas dominated by English merchants, who were able to enrich themselves through the slave trade and their “plunder-trade with America, Africa and Asia” (Hill), assisted by “state-sponsored colonial wars” and the various devices of economic management by which state power has forged the way to private wealth and a particular form of development shaped by its requirements.<sup>6</sup>

As Adam Smith observed, European success was a tribute to its mastery of the means and immersion in the culture of violence. “Warfare in India was still a sport,” John Keay observes: “in Europe it had become a science.” From a European perspective, the global conquests were “small wars,” and were so considered by military authorities, Geoffrey Parker writes, pointing out that “Cortés conquered Mexico with perhaps 500 Spaniards; Pizarro overthrew the Inca empire with less than 200; and the entire Portuguese empire [from Japan to southern Africa] was administered and defended by less than 10,000 Europeans.”

Robert Clive was outnumbered 10 to 1 at the crucial battle of Plassey in 1757, which opened the way to the takeover of Bengal by the East India Company, then to British rule over India. A few years later the British were able to reduce the numerical odds against them by mobilizing native mercenaries, who constituted 90 percent of the British forces that held India and also formed the core of the British armies that invaded China in the mid-19th century. The failure of the North American colonies to provide “military force towards the support of Empire” was one of Adam Smith’s main reasons for advocating that Britain should “free herself” from them.

Europeans “fought to kill,” and they had the means to satisfy their blood lust. In the American colonies, the natives were astonished by the savagery of the Spanish and British. “Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the peoples of Indonesia were equally appalled by the all-destructive fury of European warfare,” Parker adds. Europeans had put far behind them the days described by a 12th century Spanish pilgrim to Mecca, when “The warriors are engaged in their wars, while the people are at ease.” The Europeans may have come to trade, but they stayed to conquer: “trade cannot be maintained without war, nor war without trade,” one of the Dutch conquerors of the East Indies wrote in 1614. Only China and Japan were able to keep the West out at the time, because “they already knew the rules of the game.” European domination of the world “relied critically upon the constant use of force,” Parker writes: “It was thanks to their military superiority, rather than to any social, moral or natural advantage, that the white peoples of the world managed to create and control, however briefly, the first global hegemony in History.”<sup>7</sup> The temporal qualification is open to question.

“Twentieth-century historians can agree that it was usually the Europeans who broke violently into Asian trading systems that had been relatively peaceful before their arrival,” James

Tracy writes, summarizing the scholarly study of merchant empires that he edited. They brought state trading to a region of relatively free markets, "open to all who came in peace, under terms that were widely known and generally accepted." Their violent entry into this world brought a "combination, characteristically if not uniquely European, of state power and trading interest, whether in the form of an arm of the state that conducts trade, or a trading company that behaves like a state." "The principal feature that differentiates European enterprises from indigenous trade networks in various parts of the globe," he concludes, is that the Europeans "organized their major commercial ventures either as an extension of the state...or as autonomous trading companies...which were endowed with many of the characteristics of a state," and were backed by the centralized power of the home country.

Portugal paved the way by extracting a tribute from Asian trade, "first creating a threat of violence to Asian shipping," then selling protection from the threat they posed while providing no further service in return: "in modern terms," Pearson notes, "this was precisely a protection racket." Portugal's more powerful European adversaries took over, with more effective use of violence and more sophisticated measures of management and control. The Portuguese had not "radically altered the structure of [the] traditional system of trade," but it was "smashed to pieces" by the Dutch. The English and Dutch companies "used force in a much more selective, in fact rational way" than their Portuguese predecessors: "it was used only for commercial ends...the bottom line was always the balance sheet." The force at their command, and its domestic base, was far superior as well. The British, not succumbing to the "Dutch disease," largely displaced their major rivals. The leading role of state power and violence is a notable feature in the "essential" contribution of the colonies to "the state of Europe" that Adam Smith described, as in its internal develop-



ment.<sup>8</sup>

Britain has been considered an exception to the crucial role of state power and violence in economic development; the British liberal tradition held this to be the secret of its success. The assumptions are challenged in a valuable reinterpretation of Britain's rise to power by John Brewer. Britain's emergence "as the military *Wunderkind* of the age" in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, exercising its authority "often brutally and barbarously" over subject peoples in distant lands, he concludes, coincided with an "astonishing transformation in British government, one which put muscle on the bones of the British body politic." Contrary to the liberal tradition, Britain in this period became a "strong state," "a fiscal-military state," thanks to "a radical increase in taxation" and "a sizable public administration devoted to organizing the fiscal and military activities of the state." The state became "the largest single actor in the economy," one of Europe's most powerful states "judged by the criteria of the ability to take pounds out of people's pockets and to put soldiers in the field and sailors on the high seas." "Lobbies, trade organizations, groups of merchants and financiers, fought or combined with one another to take advantage of the protection afforded by the greatest of economic creatures, the state."

During this period, the British tax rate reached a level twice as high as France (traditionally considered the over-centralized all-powerful state), and the discrepancy was widening. Public debt grew rapidly as well. By the end of the 18th century, taxes absorbed almost a quarter of per capita income, rising to over a third during the Napoleonic wars. "Judged both absolutely and comparatively, Britain was heavily taxed." The growth of tax receipts was over five times as high as economic growth in the period when the military *Wunderkind* emerged. Part of the reason was efficiency; to an extent unusual in Europe, tax collection was a central government function. Another factor was the greater