

Fangzheng Zhou, 2018

Volume 4 Issue 2, pp. 304-314

Date of Publication: 19th July, 2018

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.42.304314>

This paper can be cited as: Zhou, F. (2018). A “Frontier” or a “Sphere”: An Essay on a Legacy of European Colonialism. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2), 304-314.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

## **A “FRONTIER” OR A “SPHERE”: AN ESSAY ON A LEGACY OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM**

**Fangzheng Zhou**

*Kent School, Connecticut, United States of America*

[zhouf20@kent-school.edu](mailto:zhouf20@kent-school.edu)

---

### **Abstract**

*As a historical phenomenon, European colonialism has, from its beginning through the present day, a tremendous influence on the history of human beings, and has long been studied by students and scholars from all parts of the world. Traditional understandings of the motivations and impacts of European colonialism has focused on the economic, political, and religious areas, which, without doubts, are true and sound. However, the mentality behind the decisions and actions of colonialism was not commonly understood. This paper focus on exploring this type of predatory “frontier” mentality, as well as its antithesis the “sphere” mentality, through interpreting and understanding the human mind behind the various causes and consequences of European colonialism. Given the current global situation, the growth of the “sphere” mentality and the decline of its antithesis is likely to be the general trend as a product of the evolution of human civilization in the twenty first century. This shift in human mentality from competition to cooperation is the biggest legacy of European colonialism.*

### **Keywords**

Europe, Colonialism, “Frontier”, “Sphere”, Competition, Cooperation

---

## **1. Introduction**

Ever since the first settlers arrived at their new home, European colonialism had a continuing influence on the entire planet. During this process, the European nations dominated indigenous peoples of other parts of the Earth, and often exploited the local resources to build up prosperity in Europe. The influx of wealth and resources bewildered the Europeans, whose perspective was limited by the era. They imagined the world as a competitive “frontier,” where the strong lived on the flesh of the weak. As history unfolded, however, rationality and cooperation turned the tide, as cooperation has begun to substitute competition as the theme of international affairs nowadays.

## **2. Analysis**

### **2.1 European Colonialism and “Frontier” Mentality**

This so called “frontier” mentality came from the belief that international affairs were guided solely by the rules of the jungle. This belief was developed from ages of chaos after the fall of the Roman Empire, which marked the formal collapse of law and relative peace. Europeans were divided under the rules of different political entities, all of which were then ready to establish themselves as new hegemonies just like Rome. Conspiracies, wars, and plagues were among the major themes of Middle Ages, as even powerful houses like that of Burgundy could not escape from the grimy fate of being stripped of power and annexed by the kingdom of France.

Thus, the “frontier” mentality advocated for using predatory competition to solve problems, especially domestic problems such as economic recessions. This approach stood for the establishment and aggrandizement of a sphere of influence, in which the dominated countries were forced to cede significant rights, such as resource utilization and commerce, to the dominant country. This resulted from the unique competitive history of Europe, which led to a hungry pursuit for power.

Amid such intense competitions, monarchs throughout the continent tried to find every possible way to strengthen their power, thus preserving their states and consolidating their rule. The size of a country was usually the clearest indication of its strength. Generally, more land led to more food and consequently more taxable income and population. These factors determined the size and strength of the army. Thus, European monarchs always focused on enlarging their

kingdoms, to push their frontier farther away. Before the Age of Discovery, this type of “frontier” extension happened across Europe. However, due to the balance of power between European states, it was impossible to continually enlarge frontiers in this resource-depleting continent.

The discovery of America, and the subsequent benefits of its colonization, had given this static system some lively dynamics and further proven to the Europeans the viability of predatory competition. The Portuguese made a huge profit from opening a direct trade route to Asia, while the Spaniards, with superior weapons, plundered enormous amount of gold from the native American states. The latter established a period of domination across the continent of Europe due to the large fortune amassed through conquest. Thus, colonization became a solution for the problem of survival among the European states. The Dutch, for example, established an expansive trading empire that stretched throughout the globe, which allowed them to withstand the assaults of Spanish, English, and French monarchs, a feat made possible by the wealth infused from their colonial system to the Netherlands. The new world crops such as potatoes and maize also greatly relieved the food shortage that was common in Europe (Nunn & Qian, 2010, p. 169). The New World’s almost magical ability to produce huge amount of food might also contribute to the idea that all problems can be solved by expanding to get new resources, the cornerstone of “frontier” mentality. In essence, European colonialism was the application of the ideology of predatory competition.

The problems, however, did not end with discovering and settling a “promised land”: they merely started. The hardships of settling in a new place, especially death due to diseases and, more often, battle against the natives of the area, promoted a society antagonistic towards everything from the “wilderness beyond the map,” a society hostile to outsiders, if not completely racist. The relationship between British-American settlers and Native Americans proves this point: The Native Americans often brutally attacked the British-American settlements, and the British-Americans returned the favor. As a result, the Native Americans were viewed as savages, and later an inferior race, among the British-Americans. In the end, the Native Americans, due to their inferior weaponry, lost most of their land, which the United States eagerly desired, and were forced into a bloody migration in designated areas. Events unfolded similarly as France began to exploit Algeria, as Britain began to exploit South Africa, and as Russia began to exploit Siberia. The bloody competitions that led to and resulted from European colonialism brewed high levels of antagonism between different social and ethnic groups,

another marker of the “frontier” mentality. The statement “all around us there were savages” is firm evidence of this antagonism, which persisted down the centuries, and contributed to many social and racial issues that the world faces today (Weiskel, 1983, p. 235).

Another problem that was generated from this application of “frontier” mentality was environmental damage. European colonial activities mingled species from all parts of the globe that had lived secluded from each other before. The artificial transportation of plants and animals introduced a new environment that changed sharply in a short amount of time, which gave the native species little time to adapt their biology and survive. In other words, the European colonizers participated in bringing invasive species to the frontiers throughout the world they tried to establish. In other cases, they brought native species back to their home in Europe, such as the potato. To minimize their work, Europeans tended to grow the same crops or raise the same livestock, resulting in a large population dependent on a few species as energy inputs. This system was very vulnerable: when one of the pillar species collapsed an outbreak of famine would occur. This famine came with the potato failure during 1840s.

Moreover, when utilizing resources and transforming them into power, European nations did not realize the importance of conservation. Overhunting, overfishing, and deforestation were common back then, which led to a rapid decrease, or even extinction, in many species. As Michael Williams states, “In the space of 10,000 years (a mere 500 generations) humans were going to have an effect on global vegetation only slightly less dramatic and widespread than that of the Ice Age in the 100,000 years before” (Williams, 2014, p. 11). In the animal kingdom, the dodo bird, for example, became extinct due to its failure to survive the invasive species brought by humans. According to an article on the BBC News website, the International Union for Conservation of Nature has listed “801 animal and plant species (mostly animal) known to have gone extinct since 1500” (Knight, 2012).

European colonialism also drastically changed the demographics of the world. Diseases from Europe traveled to other continents along with the colonizers, and local viruses spread to Europe on the trip back home (Kagan, Ozment, Turner, & Frank, 2014, p. 90). In the Americas, for example, European diseases such as measles and smallpox spread violently among the natives of the American continents (Kagan, Ozment, Turner, & Frank, 2014, p. 90). Indigenous population decreased at such a rapid speed in such a large scale, that, according to author Charles C. Mann, parts of the forests cleared away by the natives for farming had been restored, before

being cleared away by the European settlers (Mann, 2011, pp. 32-33). Meanwhile, Europeans, in turn, suffered a type of syphilis from the Americas.

Native Americans were also enslaved and forced to work under harsh conditions, which resulted in a high mortality rate. As Mann demonstrates, the native population of Hispaniola, for example, dropped from at least 60,000 to 26,000 in twenty-two years, and in another thirty-four years this number dropped to less than 500 (Mann, 2011, pp. 11). The bloody oppression ended with the Europeans, who now settled in the newly conquered lands, wiping out “their own labor force” (Mann, 2011, pp. 11). Unwilling to work themselves, the colonists “employed” people from other places to labor for them instead as slaves. Africa was depopulated as a result; millions of its people were taken to the shores, lived there for a short period of time to get accustomed to food of the New World, and were then shipped across the Atlantic into endless years of oppression and labor. Some Europeans also stepped in and filled some of the consequential population vacuum, as can be seen in South Africa. The population changes from the age of the frontiers have left a visible mark in the world today.

## **2.2 “Sphere” Mentality and Global Cooperation**

In the twentieth century, the continuing global tension and even direct military conflicts marked the failure of predatory competition and the “frontier” mentality. The First World War, the origin of many conflicts in the rest of the century, broke out due to the inability of the new-born powers to extend their frontiers: the entire world was mostly colonized by traditional European powers. Thus, to build up their economies, which would then back up their political goal and international status, the new empires decided to challenge old European colonizers. The predatory competition among the predators themselves turned out to be a disaster. The two world wars caused tens of millions of battle casualties, with more deaths among civilians. The economic damage from these wars were also high. For United States alone, the cost of WWII was a staggering four-thousand-billion dollar, adjusted for inflation as of 2011 (Daggett, 2010). The wars and conflicts also significantly disturbed world trade, which furthered the economic hardships of post-war countries. Clearly, since the Earth was not a flat, unlimited expanse of land, but rather a definite sphere, the ideology of “frontierism” would not work forever, and conflicts would be inevitable. Given the devastating results of the two world wars and the creation of atomic weapons, the substitution of the predatory competition with cooperation among all humans, a kind of “sphere” mentality, will fit the *raison d'état*. The predatory competition among European states has also weakened them badly, to a point when the former enslaved people

within European spheres of influence were able to achieve independence. The whole system of predatory European colonialism was thus officially gone.

Even during the early stage of European colonialism, there were voices that spoke against the successful domination of European civilization. Some thinkers and artists were disgusted by the manner of colonization process, as well as the justification Europeans gave in its defense. They advocated for cultural relativism, treating each culture as unique equals, and were against wars and violence which European colonizers sometimes used to sustain their domination. This opposition towards the predatory competitions would later develop into forces that called for cooperation, or even globalization.

Support for the “sphere” mentality grew during the twentieth century, when the idea of predatory competition failed to work. After WWI, the unprecedentedly high numbers of casualties made many realize the importance of cooperation, and anti-war feelings skyrocketed in Europe (Alpha History, n.d.), where fierce competition was the common theme for previous centuries. The brutal nature of WWII added on to the devastating “impact on the physical and mental health”. (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet Muenchen, 2014). For this reason, Woodrow Wilson, the president of United States, proposed to organize a League of Nations, a milestone event that marked the rise of “spherism”. The eruption of WWII indicated the weakness of this institution; however, it did not destroy this system of international cooperation. The United Nations further improved the institution by extending its field of activity and formally included racial equality in its charter, a necessary step for cooperation between the entire human race. The Cold War saw the last major “frontieristic” struggle, and the last time in current human history when competition and antagonism dominated the theme of international affairs. Even then, a significant number of people pressed for peace and cooperation rather than wars and conflicts. The most notable examples are the anti-war movement throughout the western hemisphere in response to the Vietnam war, as well as movement later in the century that called for less tension between the superpowers.

Since then, the world has seen more than two decades of relative peace and cooperation. The United Nations, for example, was reinvigorated in its role. According to the UN official website, there have been 57 peacekeeping missions since 1988, out of a total of 71, suggesting resurgence in the effort to maintain peace throughout the world after the Cold War (United Nations, n.d.). The recent decline in both missions and personnel in UN peacekeepers reflects the progress towards stability on Earth, another basis for cooperation and development. There was

also international support for natural disasters. After the earthquake that happened in 2010 in Haiti, countries and international organizations all over the world sent in aids during 2010-2011, totaling over 1 billion U.S. dollars (The Guardian, n.d.). Personnel were also sent to Haiti for rescuing trapped victims or maintaining stability on the island. Support on this scale and scope could not happen in a world full of predatory competition among nations. Even if there was international support for a natural disaster, it might not end up in a positive way. The 1923 Kanto earthquake, for example, saw an aid of 12 million dollars from United States. However, it ended in “mutual accusations”, as some Japanese expressed “resentment towards western rescuers”, and in America Japan was viewed as “ungrateful” to the help, according to Joshua Hammer (2011). The right-wing forces in Japan even used this disaster as an opportunity to persecute minorities within the country. Today, the world has moved towards a more cooperative mindset, which can be appropriately supported by the humanitarian help the rest of the world have given for Haiti.

Another related field with increasing international cooperation has been in counter-terrorism. In a world of “frontier” mentality, countries might even sponsor terrorist organizations to weaken their opponents, which would only cause more suffering while contributing nothing to improving the situation. In the late twentieth century, there was an increase in sharing information, providing training programs, arresting notorious terrorists, and initiating sanctions against terrorist organizations. According to data, about 173 countries froze over 100 million dollars in assets of terrorist groups (Farnesina, n.d.).

Countries also tried to avoid sensitive issues when collaborating on counter-terrorism, thus preventing the effort from collapsing (Cordesman, 2010). The same method has also been applied to counter transnational crimes. For example, there were many missions in Asia and the Americas to hunt down drug dealers who had committed crimes in several sovereign countries. Without the idea that the world is a sphere, that a problem beyond the borders is also one within, there is no other approach to control and improving global security. Collaborations, and thus peace, are usually more attainable through a multinational organization. Shanghai cooperation organization is the most sufficient Eurasian organization in central Asia, it was started by shanghai 5 first in 1996 (Ahadi et al., 2015, p. 43). At Bishkek summit all the defense ministers agreed in case of a security threat in the region or to the members to create and formulate a mechanism to respond any peace threat ad to stabilize the region (Ahadi et al., 2015, p. 43). Similar organizations are formed in other continents of the world, and they have displayed great

significance in maintaining regional peace and cooperation, instead of predatory and expansionist wars.

Countries also cooperate in protecting the environment. Most countries of the world have tried to drop their carbon-emission rate. Paris, for example, stopped being “the city of light.” In China, there were also efforts to protect nature by recovering the vegetation in places like the Loess Plateau. Data showed that the vegetation coverage in the Loess Plateau increased from 17% to 34%, while average income per person almost tripled (The World Bank Group, 2007). In this project, the International Development Association contributed more than half the cost of the project, greatly accelerating its progress (The World Bank Group, 2007). There was also an effort to put limitation on emissions from factories, improve the public transportation system and encourage sustainable transport. Across the globe countries have spent a significant amount of governmental revenues in conservation. The United States, for example, spent more than 8 billion dollars in 2017, according to its Environmental Protection Agency (The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2017). These nations also have tried to cooperate as seen in the Paris Climate Agreement.

Furthermore, there is an increasing interest in international exchange in education and academics. Compared with the early twentieth century, there is more curriculum devoted to foreign history and culture in many countries. More students and scholars also travel abroad to either seek more advanced education or authentic cultural experience. In the United States, for example, there was a 3.4% increase in the number of international students who currently study there, while there was a 3.8% increase in the number of American students who chose to study elsewhere in the world (Institution of International Education, 2018). From these students and scholars, societies of different nations could acquire a portal that could provide a more detailed understanding of each other’s cultures, improving the ability and the conditions for countries to collaborate.

### **3. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries witnessed the rise of a “sphere” mentality, which advocated for cooperation to attain a win-win situation. This trend happened because of the increase in human’s capability of production, the antagonism against destructive “frontieristic” wars and conflicts, the rise of nations formally dominated by others, the recognition of tolerance and equality, and the vital challenges that affect the entire world

today. On a general basis, the “sphere” mentality and cooperation between nations, which it stands for, will continue to grow, while the “frontier” mentality will enter its decline. This general trend will be the landmark of the twenty first century. Future research can focus on the possible impacts of a world where cooperative “sphere” mentality is common, possible obstacles of the development of this “sphere” mentality, and what change this mindset will trigger in the future.

## References

- Ahadi, N., Deebhijarn, S., Sornsaruht, P., Taghipour, A., Mohammadi, N., & Lotfian, A. (2015). Russian Federation Geo-Economic Impact and Relationship in Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Influence in the Energy Market. *People*, 1(1), 42-51. Retrieved from <https://grdspublishing.org/index.php/people/article/view/29>
- Alpha History. (n.d.). The human cost of world war I. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from alphahistory.com website: <http://alphahistory.com/worldwar1/human-cost/>
- Cordesman, A. H. (2010, March 11). International cooperation in counterterrorism: Redefining the threat and the requirement. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from Center for Strategic and International Studies Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy website: [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/100316\\_New\\_Reports\\_International\\_Cooperation\\_Counterterrorism.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/100316_New_Reports_International_Cooperation_Counterterrorism.pdf)
- Daggett, S. (2010, June 29). Costs of major U.S. wars. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from CRS Report for Congress website: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22926.pdf>
- Farnesina. (n.d.). Fight against terrorism. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from Farnesina website: [https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica\\_estera/temi\\_globali/lotta\\_terrorismo/](https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/temi_globali/lotta_terrorismo/)
- Forbes, S. (2014, August 2). The horrid economic consequences of world war I -- we still suffer from them. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from Forbes.com website: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveforbes/2014/08/02/economic-consequences-of-the-great-war/#1b9d9c392b21>
- The Guardian. (n.d.). Haiti earthquake aid pledged by country. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from The Guardian website: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2010/jan/14/haiti-quake-aid-pledges-country-donations#data>
- Hammer, J. (2011, May). The great japan earthquake of 1923. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from Smithsonian.com website: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-great-japan-earthquake-of-1923-1764539/>

Institution of International Education. (n.d.). Open doors 2017 executive summary. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from IIE: The Power of International Education website:

<https://www.iie.org/en/Why-IIE/Announcements/2017-11-13-Open-Doors-2017-Executive-Summary>

Kagan, D., Ozment, S., Turner, F. M., & Frank, A. (2014). *The western heritage, since 1300* (AP, Eleventh ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson

Knight, R. (2012, April 15). Biodiversity loss: How accurate are the numbers? BBC News. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17826898>

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitaet Muenchen. (2014, January 21). Economic history: The long shadow of world war II. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from ScienceDaily website: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/01/140121130759.htm>

Mann, C. C. (2011). *1493: Uncovering the new world columbus created*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf

Nunn, N., & Qian, N. (2010, Spring). The columbian exchange: A history of disease, food, and ideas. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 24(2), 163-188. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25703506>

Sluyter, A. (2001, June). Colonialism and landscape in the americas: Material/Conceptual transformations and continuing consequences. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 91(2), 410-428. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3651268>

United Nations. (n.d.). Our history. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from United Nations Peacekeeping website: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/our-history>

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2017, August 29). EPA's budget and spending. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency website: <https://www.epa.gov/planandbudget/budget>

Weiskel, T. C. (1983, January). Rubbish and racism. *The Yale Review*, LXXII(2), 225-244. Retrieved from <http://ecoethics.net/Papers/Rubbish-and-Racism.pdf>

Weiskel, T. C. (1987, Winter). Agents of empire: Steps toward an ecology of imperialism. *Environmental Review: ER*, 11(4), 275-288. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3984136>

Williams, M. (2014). *Deforesting the earth: From prehistory to global crisis: an abridgment* [Ebook Central]. Retrieved from <https://ks.kent->

[school.edu:2271/lib/kentschool/detail.action?docID=547719&query=deforestation since 1500#](http://school.edu:2271/lib/kentschool/detail.action?docID=547719&query=deforestation+since+1500#)

The World Bank Group. (2007, March 15). Restoring china's loess plateau. Retrieved April 3, 2018, from The World Bank website: The World Bank Group. "Restoring China's Loess Plateau." World Bank. March 15, 2007. Accessed April 03, 2018.

[http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2007/03/15/restoring-chinas-loess-plateau.](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2007/03/15/restoring-chinas-loess-plateau)