



## Colonialism as Globalism

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### Abstract

Lorenzo Veracini's book *Colonialism: A Global History* offers a sweeping and negative portrait of colonialism across the world and throughout history, which provides a compelling jumping off point for exploring globalism. The book depicts different phases of colonialism as global waves brought about by the economic incentives of (unequal) trade. These colonial trades, including both protectionist and free trade, were of sufficient depth and breadth to lead to "deep and lasting impacts" on the states involved – that is, to globalism. Veracini's arguments, while generally convincing, nonetheless suffer from an overly broad rendering, which misses specific historical details. Furthermore, the book ignores both the agency of the colonized and intercolonial trade, which may account for the continuation of globalism in a post-colonial era. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, Veracini's work provides useful insights into colonialism, economic incentive, and globalism.



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### Colonialism

A Global History. By Lorenzo Veracini, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2023 ix, 218 pp., \$46.95 (paperback)

Could globalism have happened without colonialism? While Lorenzo Veracini does not attempt to answer this question outright in his book *Colonialism: A Global History* (2023), he presents historical colonialism as a widespread practice that intrinsically led to globalism (p. 31). Significantly, he associates this colonial globalization with capitalism (2023, p. 30), and it is worth examining the intersection of economics, colonialism, and globalism in the context

of Veracini's book, as well as in the wider context of globalism scholarship.

Veracini looks at unequal interconnections across the world over the *longue durée*, in many ways picking up on Wallerstein, but rather than looking at the world historical economy more broadly, he focuses on colonialism (2023, p. 9). The book describes colonialism as an "unequal relation" and colonisation as "the material and institutional reality accompanying that relation," which includes "the exploitation of forcibly obtained favourable terms of trade" (Veracini, 2023, p. 16). Different types of unequal trade often characterize the different

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phases – or waves, as Veracini depicts them – of colonialism. In this rendering, colonialism occurs in roughly seven successive waves that ebb and flow over time, each with different defining features; in particular, many of the waves are characterized by a dominant economic mode of trade, modes which, much like the waves themselves, intermingle and overlap (Veracini, 2023, p. 61). These unequal trades provide the incentive for colonial projects: by meeting the “inexhaustible demand for commodities,” those engaged in colonial trade could make massive profits (Veracini, 2023, pp. 11, 24).

Obviously colonial trade across continents is a global activity, but globalism and globalization involve more than simple global activity. To take here a focused, economics-based view of these concepts – for approaches to globalization and the degree of focus thereof vary widely across disciplines (see Pieterse, 2012) – Flynn and Giraldez (2006) define them as the permanent presence of global trade, when “all heavily populated land masses began to exchange products continuously” and on a scale sufficient to “generate lasting impacts on all trading partners” (p. 211), while Keohane and Nye (2000) provide the useful distinction of identifying globalism as a condition of the world and globalization as the process by which the condition increases or decreases, a convention which will be observed here (p. 105). Thus, in this formulation, globalism is not merely global activity but rather a specific global activity – trade – that, having connected the world, maintains that connection over the long term. In this way, economic globalism acts as a vehicle for other types of globalism (e.g., cultural and social).

One approach to trade, protectionism, is usually associated with antiglobalism (Walter, 2022, p. 422), but Veracini convincingly demonstrates that the economic doctrine most associated with protectionism – mercantilism – was in fact used to promote colonialism (and thus by extension globalism). Mercantilism, which characterizes the first, second, and fifth colonial waves, focuses on maximizing specie within a nation’s economy (Veracini, 2023, pp. 55, 112). This accumulation of wealth can be accomplished by a “constant flow towards the metropole of commodities [from the colonies] that can be exchanged for specie,” a process made profitable by imposing terms of the

commodity trades on the colonies that are favorable to the metropole (Veracini, 2023, p. 55).

Paradoxically, the economic doctrine opposed to mercantilism – free trade – can also function as a colonial source of profits. Rather than focusing on the “direct” imposition of favorable trade terms through military force, the metropole can exercise “informal control” and thereby capture supposedly free markets on favorable terms “with cheap manufactures”; indeed, free trade colonialism tries to shape colonized societies in order to “constitute the captive markets that could absorb the metropole’s” products (Veracini, 2023, pp. 65, 100). Free trade is associated with the fourth, seventh, and to a lesser extent third waves (Veracini, 2023, pp. 92, 74, 164). For example, in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial India during the fourth wave, the British engaged in free trade, which enabled them to control certain colonial territories (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990, p. 285). As for globalism, this opening of trade naturally encourages worldwide exchange and thus globalization, though it is important to bear in mind that economic liberalization is not the same thing as globalization, but rather a facilitator of it (Scholte, 2008, p. 1475).

Each of these economic doctrines acts as an impetus for the other in the colonial world. Mercantilism functions as a “precursor” to free trade, which then reverts back to mercantilism in a cyclical fashion (Veracini, 2023, pp. 25, 70). The self-reproducing nature of these cycles thus perpetuates trade, and in this way globalism becomes more permanent.

Nonetheless, Veracini’s presentation of colonialism and colonial trade seems incomplete, and thus the colonial connection to globalism also remains incomplete. In general, Veracini paints his portrait of colonialism in broad brushstrokes, which, while convincing generally, may not hold up as well to finer historical scrutiny. For example, during the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, France’s trade policies regarding a certain type of cloth called *guinée*, produced in part in its Indian colony of Pondicherry, were quite complex: over the course of several decades, the French government changed its policies on multiple occasions, at times restricting the ability of Pondicherry to export *guinée* to other French colonies, at times reducing tariffs, at times

increasing tariffs, and at times increasing tariffs but providing exceptions for *guinée* from Pondicherry (Masaki, 2022, pp. 109-112). Great Britain likewise engaged in complex patterns of *guinée* trade, which included at various times direct trade from India to the British West African colonies, as well as the re-exportation to West Africa of French *guinée* imported from India to Great Britain, which was then traded among different West African colonies (Masaki, 2022, 113). In such circumstances, it is hard to see a monolithic colonial economic strategy designed solely to extract profits. Indeed, as Masaki points out, aside from all of the variegated business interests, which both cooperated and competed, “Agents in the public sector were not monolithic either” – varying incentives abounded, which included government revenue, but not exclusively (pp. 103-104).

As this example demonstrates, a portrayal like Veracini’s of colonialism as a single united force does not capture all of the colonial dynamics. While colonized peoples are certainly subjected, they are not only subjects. As Pedersen et al. (2022) put it, “Global relations are rarely that simple, nor unidirectional, as people are not just objects of colonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism and globalisation” – the colonized have agency (p. 610).

Furthermore, there is a body of scholarship that rejects the “bipolar metropolis-colonies perspective” that Veracini assumes (Yun-Casalilla, 2022, p. 542). As actors with agency, the colonies maintained important relations not just with the metropole but also with other colonies (Yun-Casalilla, 2022, p. 549). Veracini’s broad brush does not capture these: as Pieterse (2012) suggests, “Fine-grained studies of imperialism” – and colonialism – “correct centrist metropolitan approaches” by emphasizing “local forces” and their non-metropole interactions (p. 8). In the example of *guinée*, the French Indian colony in some periods exported cloth directly to French West African colonies without passing through France itself (Masaki, 2022, p. 114). Earlier colonies also engaged in these horizontal relationships, such as the first wave Spanish and Portuguese imperial colonies: “the dynamics of these empires were not dictated from the centre” (Yun-Casalilla, 2022, p. 543), in part because of the relative weakness of the Iberian metropolises due to the distance (Veracini, 2023, p. 31), and so these colonies were able to engage in “multilateral relations” (Yun-Casalilla,

2022, p. 544). In sum, the specific historical circumstances of colonies could lead to diverse intercolonial relationships.

What is more, these diverse relationships could perhaps account for the permanence of trade-derived globalism after decolonization. Veracini’s depictions of colonial trade provide a nice link to globalism, but what happens after colonialism? Veracini (2023) would of course say either that colonialism has not ended, or that it ended only recently, but even he would accept that traditional colonialism is over (p. 11). Nonetheless, those horizontal intercolonial relations created global interconnections that could last even after the metropole was gone. As Gardner and Roy put it, “colonialism [is] an agent of globalization,” not just because of metropole-colony trade, but also because the colonies were not “one-sidedly incorporated in a European dominated economic system” but rather engaged in “mutual interactions between the colonizers and the colonized” (as cited in Masaki, 2022, p. 104).

Finally, the reader should remain wary of the aforementioned broad brushstrokes used in *Colonialism*, not just with respect to the specific historical details, but also with respect to the general concepts. Veracini (2023) distinguishes imperialism from colonialism by suggesting that the former derives profits from tribute while the latter derives profits from trade (p. 3), but in practice he often conflates the two concepts, for example by writing that “the most violent colonisers” – not imperialists – “seek tribute” (p. 12), or by referring to the first wave Iberians as “imperial colonisers” (p. 20), or by describing the fourth colonial wave as “the imperialism of free trade” (92). As Nye and Keohane (1971) point out, the word “imperialism” “is sometimes used to describe virtually any relationship across state boundaries between unequals that involves the exercise of influence, [which] includes most of world politics and thereby becomes virtually devoid of analytic value” (p. 346). One gets the sense that a similar comment could be directed at Veracini’s extremely inclusive rendering of colonialism.

### Conclusion

On the other hand, it would be incorrect to say that *Colonialism* is devoid of analytic value. On the contrary, Veracini uses his broad historical brush

to paint a portrait full of insights on colonialism and its effects. As he demonstrates, the economic incentives offered by colonialism make it seem, if not inevitable, then at least inexorable. Thus, to return the original question, while globalism might not necessarily require colonialism, colonialism did lead to “a single interconnected and intensifying global colonial world” (Veracini, 2023, p. 9) and so, inexorably, perhaps inevitably, to globalism.

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