

Environmental Impacts of Colonial Dynamics: A Comparative Approach in the Colonial America(s), 1500–1700

Amélia Polonia

The research project centers on the environmental impacts of colonial dynamics in the First Global Age, with an emphasis on the colonial Americas. From 1400 to 1800, European overseas expansion and colonization processes contributed to environmental changes while connecting different continents and oceans at a global level. This led to global ecological flows among continents and across oceans with a direct impact upon local environments. Problems included biological invasions and overexploitation of resources. A colonial economy ruled by European markets introduced new patterns of territory management, property regimes, and soil exploitation. These factors are frequently presented as some of the main reasons for the “great divergence” between West and East. Issues of economic (under)development and (un)sustainable development are the result of imperial-oriented policies. While the research so far has been valuable and important, it needs to be revised with new approaches employing colonial and ecological studies. At this stage of the project I will focus on colonial studies.

Classic historiography, based on the assumptions of Groves’ “green imperialism” or Crosby’s “ecological imperialism,” showed how colonial plantations based on monoculture and *latifundia*, along with cattle breeding, mining, overhunting and deforestation, unbalanced old equilibria and the profile of autochthone economies—all of which was led by imperial policies imposing their ruling upon colonial settlements. They stress how hostile crops, species, bacteria and diseases invaded these continents, permanently changing the landscape, driven by the interests and the aims of the invaders. These disruptions are presented as the ultimate expression of European imperialism.

This research project intends to propose alternative approaches to the transformative processes behind and beyond the environmental impacts of colonial dynamics, based on two assumptions:

1. Nature and Culture: Two Elements of the Same Equation

Current theories on “ecological imperialism” tend to disregard that: 1) European settlers were not a homogeneous universe of agents with the same policies, cultural backgrounds and aims; 2) they interacted with societies and environments that were quite different among the different areas of colonization; and 3) far from being “natural,” those environments had already been created by pre-established cultural systems. These theories usually concentrate on the connections between power (the colonial power) and nature, excluding both autochthone people and autochthone cultures from the equation. Diversity is thus neglected, both from the point of view of colonizers and the colonized. The perspective which supports the focus of “ecological imperialism” reflects an unsurprisingly Eurocentric model of analysis, according to which the colonized are usually excluded from the dynamics of colonial processes, with global interpretations centering almost exclusively on the decisive role of European powers.

Cultural diversity, however, is ubiquitous. Joachim Radkau states that “there has always been a limited number of fundamental environmental problems in different cultures and periods of history; but there is an unlimited number of potential solutions, and these are influenced by the diversity of cultures.” This research project intends to further explore

this hypothesis.

2. Multifactorial Analysis of Colonial Empires

Instead of the classic perspective that defines European colonialism as a single, all-encompassing process, I argue that:

1. One has to clearly differentiate colonial experiences. The first contact and settlements led by the Portuguese and Spanish in the fifteenth century cannot be perceived at the same level as those spawned by the Dutch or the British in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or even those carried out by the Iberians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: **time matters**.
2. Instead of linear perspectives according to which the colonized territories were blank sheets on which Europeans wrote their history, one must investigate the different periods in the light of their aims and market demands, and existing ecosystems: **space matters**.
3. The Portuguese settlement in Latin America followed quite different patterns from that of the Spanish. Portuguese colonialism in the Indian and the Pacific worlds is not identical to the interactions in Africa or America: **colonial models matter**.

I intend to check these hypotheses concerning ecosystems transformation by initiating a comparative study departing from a common model of analysis applied to different times, spaces and colonial settlements.

After having centered my attention on my work *The Power of the Commoners*, and on the role of informal and self-organized networks within the scope of colonial dynamics in the First Global Age, I intend to apply this project (whose theoretical foundations were explored in my publication in EOLSS) to a new research area: **the comparison between the environmental impacts arising from the colonial agenda of the Portuguese and Dutch in Brazil, and the British in colonial North America for the period 1500–1700**.