

Reframing America's Modern Day Colonialism - Puerto Rico in Context in 2017



Castillo San Felipe del Morro, the 16th-century citadel overlooking San Juan Bay in Puerto Rico (Harvey Barrison/Flickr)

At times, we here in these United States barely register the meaning of words that should make the hair on the back of our neck stand on edge. This is because we have not been taught our history, or else it has been so watered down.

Take the word colonialism: to be a colony of the United States sounds almost benign; a paternalistic paradise, to be cared for by a big brother superpower. The fact is however, that colonialism has been an unalloyed evil visited on most of the world's population by Western European powers for the last 500 years.

When words lose their history, they lose their meaning, and when words lose their meaning, they lose their power. When the history is not taught, words such as 'colonialism' or 'genocide' can be spoken without them raising an alarm; the historical memories and the associations such terms *should* trigger do not come to listeners minds. We've been deprived, the lot of us, and were it not for the continued tragedies that are unfolding now, brought about by neocolonial and neoliberal forces, all this would be regrettable, but unimportant. But there are very real consequences to forgetting, and so, now more than ever, some history is in order.

Up until the latter part of the 20th century, American and European racism and the expansion of territory was a given, accepted as '[manifest destiny](#)', and '[the white man's burden](#)'.

We may consider America's history, and our original sins of genocide and slavery in isolation, but it brings it more clearly into focus to see it as part and parcel of world wide colonial history. It has ever been infused with the same perverse ideals, and heavy with the same burden of vast crimes against indigenous people

European Colonialism - Beginning with Spain



{The Conquest of Tenochtitlán, Public Domain}

[Starting in the fifteenth century](#), greed and barbarity drove the Spanish and Portuguese in Central and South America and the Caribbean to decimate the population in the quest for gold, silver and spices, and raw materials to feed a growing empire.

The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world. - [David E. Stannard](#), and,

By then [1891] the native population had been reduced to 2.5% of its original numbers and 97.5% of the aboriginal land base had been expropriated....Hundreds upon hundreds of native tribes with unique languages, learning, customs, and cultures had simply been erased from the face of the earth, most often without even the pretense of justice or law. - [Peter Montague](#)

The priest Bartolome de Las Casas documented for posterity crimes of a then unheard of barbarity. Greed had slipped its leash.

In A Brief Report on the Destruction of the Indes, Michael Curtotti [writes](#),

Having set out a general description of the oppression the Spaniards were visiting on the Indians, Las Casas then details case after case where such methods were used, tracing the invasions from the Caribbean, to Mexico, Central America and Peru. In every part of the Americas that the Spaniards reached they would violently subjugate the people, generally committing brutal and genocidal massacres, extracting tributes of gold and then reducing what remained of the the population to slavery.

For this reason, for indigenous people, the names Columbus, Cortez and Pizarro are anathema to this day.

England



Map of the world showing the extent of the British Empire in 1886. British territories colored in red. (Public Domain)

Over the course of its 400 year [colonial rampage](#), the British saw the people of India, and Africa and the Pacific as [subhuman](#), and felt entitled to the wealth of those places and people. For centuries, they too practiced racist brutality without remorse. They profited from [the slave trade](#) (routing Africans to the Caribbean), [created concentration camps](#) (in the Boer War), allowed the [mass starvation](#) of colonial subjects (in India), and engaged in the systematic destruction of cultures.

British colonialism is something many in England are [still dumbfoundingly proud of](#), despite their having committing what we recognize today as one abomination after another.

Belgium

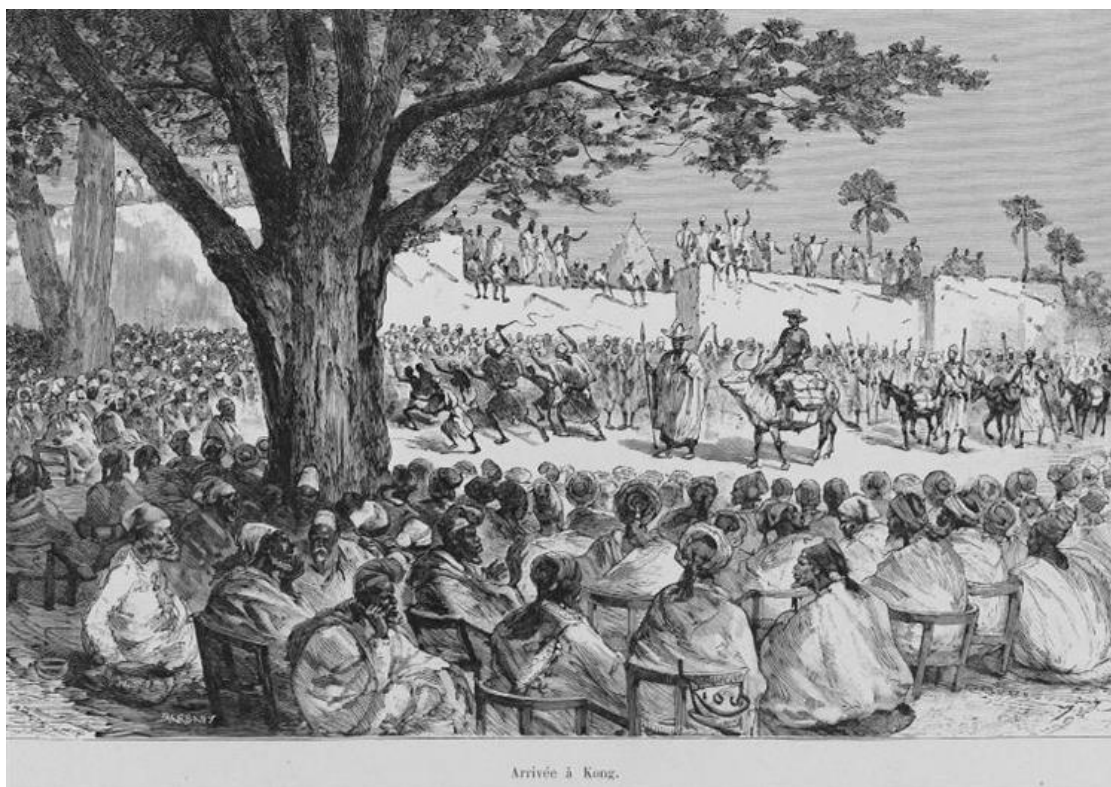


Congo Balolo Mission (ca. 1900-1910/Public Domain)

In the late 1800's, in the so-called 'Congo Free State', Belgian forces engaged in what we recognize now as unimaginable cruelty, extracting resources and subjugating the people there. All this was quintessential colonial activity, as described in [a review](#) of King Leopold's Ghost by Richard Abernethy:

"To terrorize the population into gathering rubber, Leopold's men would take women as hostages until their menfolk brought in a sufficient quantity. Villages that resisted the system were attacked and destroyed. Individuals who failed to reach their quotas were killed, tortured, mutilated. A practice that came to symbolize cruelty and horror of Leopold's Congo (as it does the chaos in Sierra Leone today) was chopping off hands."

France

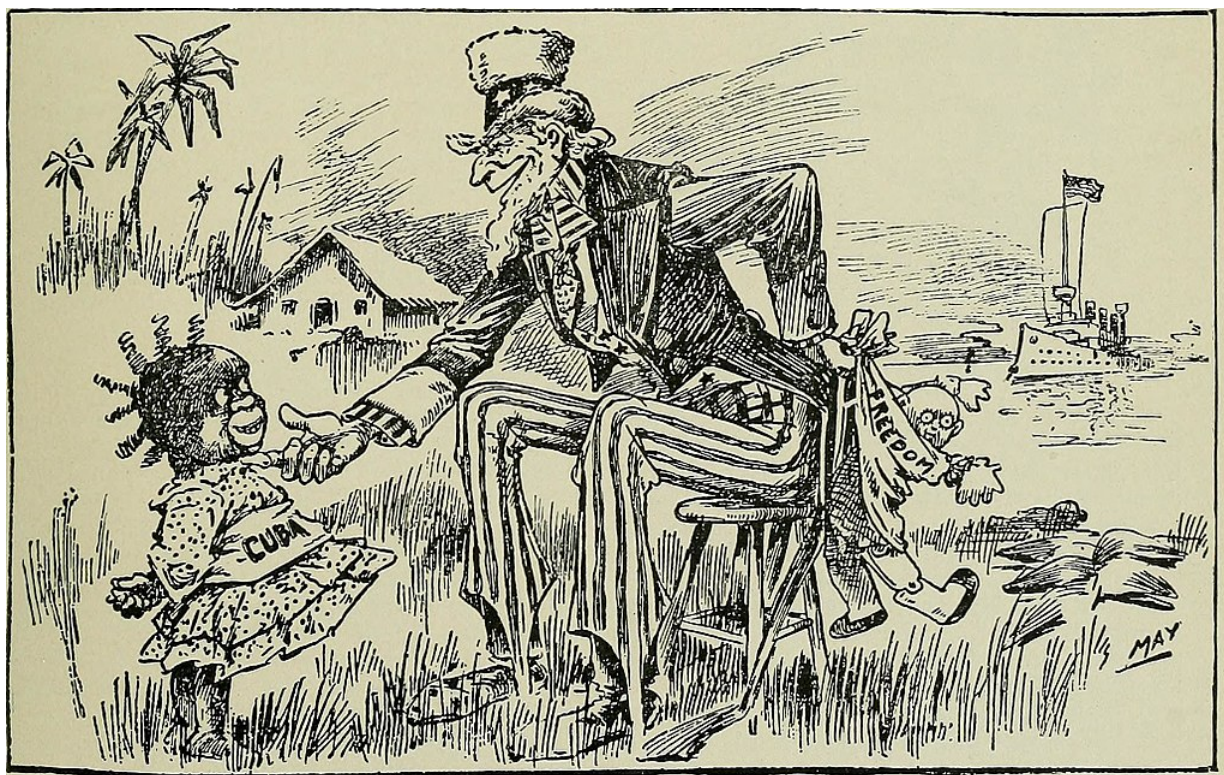


Arrival in Kong of new French West Africa governor Louis-Gustave Binger in 1892, in northern present day Côte d'Ivoire. (Public Domain)

At it's peak, France had one of the largest empires in history, reaching from Africa to the Middle East, to Asia and the Caribbean. And don't believe the persistent bullshit about the French being 'a civilizing force'. Ask any of the people they 'civilized.' They enslaved a third of the population of the African Countries they occupied. They were responsible for the deaths of 1.5 million in Algeria and half a million in South East Asia before the Americans arrived there.

The colonial mentality, everywhere you find it, has not changed its character at all to the present day. It has always been profoundly ignorant, racist, arrogant, and brutal.

The latest entry in the world's would-be empires



1904 cartoon (Public Domain)

America came late to extending the savagery of imperialism beyond its continental borders. It wasn't until [the annexation of Hawaii](#) and [the Spanish American War](#) in 1898 that the US extended its rule by force overseas. Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and The Philippines became 'possessions'.

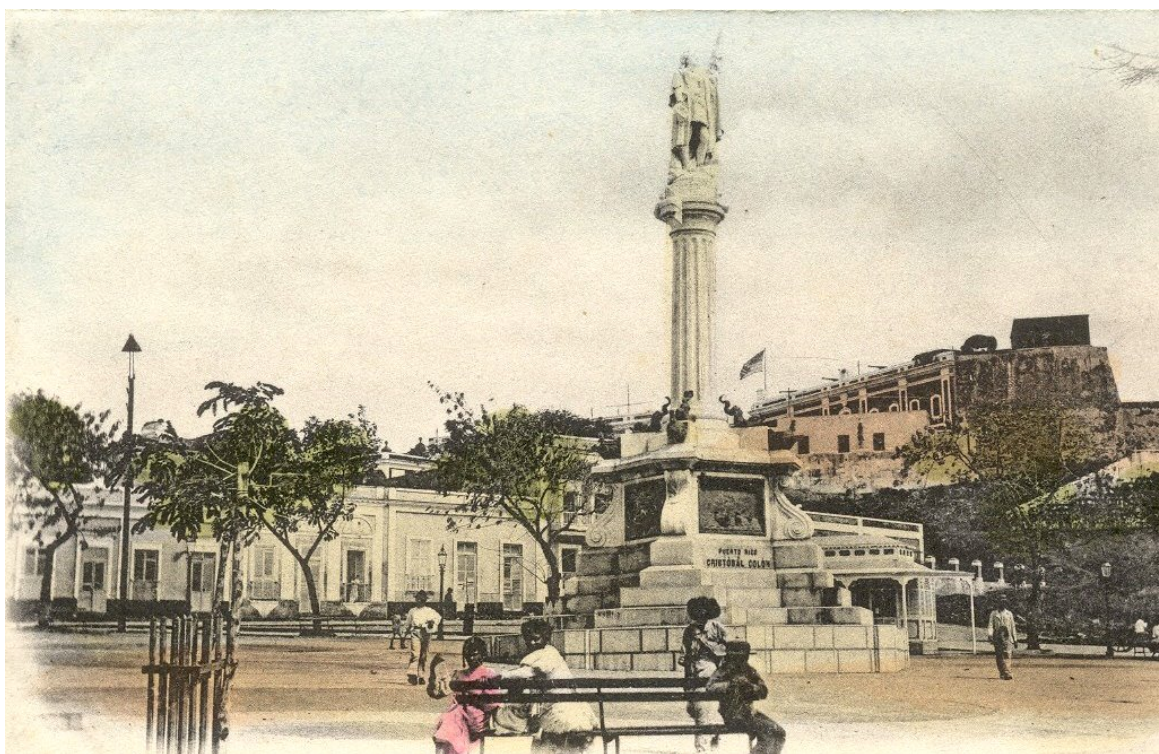
Were we to know even the bare outlines of history, I'm sure a majority of Americans would see the attitudes and actions of imperialists everywhere as morally repugnant, and the memory would be a marker guiding our thoughts, and our politics. Instead, this history is hidden from us.

American racism and avarice has been no less abhorrent than what was exhibited by the French in Asia and elsewhere, the Brits in India and South Africa, and the Spanish in the Americas. It's only in the absence of such

basic knowledge as this that we can hear the word *colonialism* spoken, and not shudder now in the recognition of what it represents.

In the twenty-first century, being overtly racist is not universally accepted, as it once was, and so the same motivation to claim resources and power needs to hide behind a different set of terms. We speak now instead of helping countries 'develop democracy', even if self determination is the last thing [those in power](#) want in this or other places.

We also speak of colonialism these days as if it were something effecting only a few people long ago. We feel it to be a slight matter, to refer to Puerto Rico as a colonial possession. We unthinkingly accept the presence of American power in far flung territories of Guam, the Virgin Islands, the Philippines, Hawaii and Alaska, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Samoa. [American propaganda](#) would have us believe that the presence of the United States in these places has been an unalloyed blessing.



*Christopher Columbus monument at Plaza Cristobal Colon in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico.
(c.1900-1915/Public Domain)*

Our past has brought us to where we are now in Puerto Rico

From its founding to the present day, this country has followed the path of an imperial power. There has never been self determination allowed, except as a means to dole out manageable amounts of local power, as a means of social control. This time tested model of giving small favors to puppet politicians, under the pretense that they represent noble democracy in action, allows us to believe we are all part of a great humanitarian enterprise, that offers the best hope to struggling humanity, while the truth of it is something quite different.

Puerto Rico has never had [representation of any consequence](#) in Washington. It has no say in its economic development, and is barred by [the repressive Jones Act](#) from trading directly with other countries. In a place where, as my father bitterly said, 'you could throw down a seed and a plant would grow', people instead [import 80% of their food](#), and pay [exorbitant prices](#) for simple items.

[Forced sterilization](#), and [medical experimentation](#) were also part of America's colonial history in Puerto Rico;

The inhabited island of Vieques was used for 55 years for Navy target practice. The pollution and disease in that place, [the legacy of environmental racism](#), will continue for generations;

The people remaining in Puerto Rico are [poorer than those in Mississippi](#), the poorest state in the country; their [rate of diabetes](#) is higher than anywhere else;

Finally they are in the brutal grip of [millionaire and billionaire speculators](#), being strangled by [unpayable debt](#). Now that Hurricane Maria has destroyed what was [already third world infrastructure](#), the [vulture capitalists are circling](#). Not having caused enough damage, they are now brazenly angling to take over what little remains of the public assets.

*delirious they rampage,
with their dead eyes,
and insatiable hunger...*

Look at what this country, the United States, has done from the point of view of the colonized and you will see the seizing of territory, the extraction of resources, and using the population to fight in the nation's wars. Wherever you find colonialism, you will see extermination, or near extermination, and cruelty and neglect of the people. You will see everywhere that *the colonized have never had any rights, except those the colonizer gives them.*

The universal characteristics of colonial mentality, the racism, greed and cruelty, I do not hesitate to say, have been on full display on the Island, and it is something we should all be repulsed by. It is something we should all respond to with outrage and with unequivocal condemnation.

Only in the absence of knowledge of world history can we continue to accept America's presence on the island of Puerto Rico as anything other than blatantly racist and oppressive. The mirror of this history needs to be held up for all to see. It's a statement of faith in humanity from that point forward, to believe that justice will then finally come to our people.

Looking at 21st century politics in a way that is historically informed is radically different than hearing the same events described without this essential context. It also yields sharply different conclusions about where we should go from here.

In the case of Puerto Rico, the United States should admit all of its past crimes, cancel the barbaric engineered debt, get the hell off the island posthaste, and pay reparations for the 119 years of extracting its wealth, and abusing and exploiting its people as a cheap labor force.

Beyond Puerto Rico alone, America has dug into other nations and cultures, worldwide. Its colonialism is still with us, hiding behind such neutered terms as globalism, and [neoliberalism](#). The evil is identical

however, with the same warped values, greed and aggression now normalized as ‘preserving our interests’.

We can place our advocacy for Puerto Rico in the larger context of the universal struggle for human rights, and we gain greater clarity and strength in doing so. As [Ana Livia Cordero wrote](#) in a letter to Malcolm X in 1964, “*the most important world-wide struggle is between the colonial and ex-colonial segment of the world and the imperialist segment*”. For our elders, and the men, women and children of Puerto Rico and elsewhere then, the fight is equal parts truth telling, and organizing and educating without pause to put an end to empires.

- From *Ending Racism - A Buddhist View*, Great Circle Publications, 2018

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