

Reassessing the Impact of Colonialism: The Historical Roots of Contemporary Global Inequalities

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Abstract:

This article addresses a persistent problem in global inequality research: contemporary disparities in wealth, institutional capacity, and developmental opportunity are often analyzed through present-day policy or market variables while the long historical consequences of colonial rule remain insufficiently integrated into explanatory frameworks. The study aims to reassess colonialism as a constitutive rather than merely background factor in the making of current global inequalities. It is theoretically informed by postcolonial political economy, historical institutionalism, and dependency-oriented approaches, which together foreground the durability of unequal power relations across formal decolonization.

Methodologically, the article adopts a historical-comparative and interpretive design based on the synthesis of interdisciplinary scholarship on colonial governance, extractive economies, coerced labor systems, trade dependency, and postcolonial state formation. Its scope is macro-historical rather than regionally isolated, focusing on the structural pathways through which colonial rule reorganized land, labor, institutions, and external economic relations across colonized societies. The analysis shows that colonialism contributed to present-day inequalities not through a single uniform mechanism, but through the interaction of extractive institutions, racially stratified labor regimes, externally oriented production systems, and hierarchical incorporation into the global economy. These structures often outlived empire in formal terms and continued to shape postcolonial developmental constraints, uneven state capacity, and asymmetrical participation in global markets.

The article's scholarly contribution lies in offering a historically grounded account that moves beyond reductive moral condemnation and beyond presentist explanations of inequality. It demonstrates that

contemporary global disparities are more adequately understood as the outcome of historically sedimented structural relations, not merely divergent national trajectories after independence.

Key words: Colonialism, Global inequality, Historical institutionalism, Postcolonial political economy, Dependency theory, Uneven development, World-systems analysis, Colonial legacies, Extractive institutions, Comparative historical analysis.

Introduction

Global inequality is often discussed through contemporary indicators - income gaps, unequal state capacity, debt exposure, trade asymmetries, and divergent development trajectories - yet these disparities are not adequately explained by present-day variables alone. They are embedded in historical processes that structured access to land, labor, institutions, and markets across vast parts of the world over several centuries. Treating inequality as a mainly recent outcome of domestic policy failure, market inefficiency, or uneven modernization narrows the analytical frame and obscures the extent to which global hierarchy was historically produced. For that reason, the problem of inequality must be approached not only as an economic condition but also as a historically layered structure of power (Piketty, 2014; Milanovic, 2016).

Within that larger historical frame, **colonialism** remains central to understanding why contemporary global disparities are so durable and so unevenly distributed. Colonial rule did not simply transfer wealth from one region to another in episodic fashion; it reorganized political authority, labor systems, property relations, production patterns, and external trade in ways that often outlived formal empire. These transformations shaped the institutional and economic conditions under which postcolonial states entered independence, frequently with constrained fiscal capacity, externally oriented production structures, and deeply unequal social hierarchies already in place (Rodney, 1972; Wallerstein, 1974; Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001). To take colonialism seriously, then, is not to treat it as a symbolic backdrop to modern inequality, but as one of the historical mechanisms through which that inequality was constituted.

At the same time, any attempt to analyze colonialism in relation to present-day inequality must move beyond simplified moral accounting. Purely condemnatory narratives may be politically resonant, but they are not sufficient as explanation. What matters analytically is specifying how colonial rule operated across different settings and through which institutional, economic, and social pathways its effects persisted. This requires attention to the concrete architecture of empire: **extractive institutions**, coerced or segmented labor regimes, land dispossession, commodity specialization, unequal terms of exchange, and asymmetrical incorporation into global markets. It also requires caution against monocausal reasoning. Colonialism did not generate a single uniform outcome, nor did its legacies unfold independently of postcolonial state formation, Cold War alignments, or later neoliberal restructuring. A rigorous reassessment must therefore identify structured continuities without collapsing historical complexity into deterministic formulae (Cooper, 2005; Lange, 2009).

A further reason for renewed inquiry lies in the fragmentation of existing scholarship. Research on global inequality has often proceeded along separate tracks: development economics tends to privilege contemporary institutional performance; comparative politics frequently emphasizes state capacity and governance; postcolonial scholarship foregrounds empire and domination; and historical sociology examines long-term systemic transformation. Valuable as these traditions are, they do not always converge in a way that adequately explains how colonial institutions, labor systems, and extractive economic arrangements became embedded in present-day global hierarchies. The result is a persistent gap between macro-historical accounts of imperial power and contemporary analyses of inequality. What remains insufficiently integrated is a historically grounded explanation of how colonial rule structured durable asymmetries not only within former colonies, but across the global order itself (Frank, 1967; Mahoney, 2010; Beckert, 2014).

This article addresses that gap by reassessing colonialism as a long-term structuring force in the making of contemporary global inequalities. Its central argument is that present-day disparities are more convincingly understood when colonialism is treated not as a closed historical episode but as a formative process that reorganized institutions, labor, territory, and external economic dependence in enduring ways. More specifically, the article asks: (1) through which institutional mechanisms did colonial rule generate durable developmental asymmetries; (2) how did labor coercion, land appropriation, and extractive production shape long-term patterns of inequality; (3) in what ways did colonial trade structures and

unequal incorporation into the world economy constrain postcolonial trajectories; and (4) how can colonial legacies be conceptualized without reducing contemporary inequality to a single historical cause? By addressing these questions, the article aims to clarify the historical foundations of global inequality while offering a more analytically precise account of colonialism's continuing relevance to contemporary world order.

Methods

This study employs a **historical-comparative and interpretive research design** to examine how colonial rule contributed to the formation of contemporary global inequalities. The design is appropriate because the article addresses a macro-historical problem that cannot be reduced to synchronic comparison or to present-day economic indicators alone. Instead, it investigates the long-term relationship between colonial institutions, extractive political economies, labor regimes, and unequal incorporation into the global order. A historical-comparative approach makes it possible to trace structured continuities across different colonial settings while remaining attentive to variation in form, intensity, and postcolonial trajectory (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Skocpol, 1979).

The **unit of analysis** is not the individual colony in isolation, but the broader set of institutional and political-economic mechanisms through which colonialism shaped durable inequality. Accordingly, the study focuses on recurring structural dimensions - extractive governance, coerced or segmented labor systems, land dispossession, commodity dependence, and colonial state formation - rather than on a single national case. Its scope is therefore **comparative and macro-historical**, oriented toward identifying patterned historical pathways rather than producing an exhaustive account of all colonial experiences. This level of analysis is especially suited to the article's aim of explaining how colonial rule generated asymmetries that persisted beyond formal decolonization and became embedded in contemporary global hierarchies.

The article draws on a combination of **historical scholarship, comparative historical studies, political-economic analysis, and theoretically informed secondary literature**. These sources include major works on colonial governance, empire and development, labor regimes, trade structures, institutional persistence, and postcolonial state formation. Where relevant, the analysis also engages with historically grounded empirical studies that synthesize archival, economic, or regional evidence. The use of established secondary scholarship is appropriate to the article's purpose, which is not to present new archival discovery but to offer a rigorous analytical reassessment of the relationship between colonialism and present-day inequality through interdisciplinary historical interpretation.

The **analytical strategy** combines comparative historical analysis with interpretive synthesis. First, the study identifies key mechanisms through which colonial rule reorganized political authority, labor, and economic extraction. Second, it traces how those mechanisms shaped long-term developmental constraints and institutional asymmetries. Third, it examines the extent to which these historical structures continued to influence postcolonial inequality through path-dependent processes, rather than through simple one-to-one continuity. In this respect, the method is informed by historical institutionalist attention to persistence and by political-economic approaches to dependency and unequal exchange (Pierson, 2004; Wallerstein, 1974). The goal is not to establish deterministic causation, but to clarify historically plausible pathways linking colonial structures to contemporary disparities.

This method has clear **limitations**. Because the study operates at a broad comparative scale, it cannot capture the full specificity of every colonial formation or postcolonial trajectory. Nor does it claim that colonialism alone explains current global inequalities; rather, it treats colonial rule as a major structuring force whose effects interacted with later political, economic, and geopolitical developments. The interpretive nature of the study also means that its argument depends on the strength and coherence of historical synthesis rather than on statistical testing. These limitations are acknowledged as intrinsic to macro-historical inquiry, but they do not diminish the value of the approach for addressing questions that require long-duration structural analysis.

Results

The findings indicate that colonialism contributed to contemporary global inequalities through a set of mutually reinforcing structural mechanisms rather than through a single continuous legacy. Across diverse imperial settings, four pathways appear especially consequential: the establishment of extractive institutions, the consolidation of coercive labor and land regimes, the creation of externally dependent

trade structures, and the formation of colonial states whose administrative logics often outlived formal empire. Taken together, these mechanisms did not produce identical outcomes everywhere, but they consistently narrowed developmental possibilities for colonized societies while expanding the economic and political advantages of metropolitan centers (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001; Rodney, 1972).

A first major finding concerns the long-term effects of **extractive institutions**. In many colonial territories, political authority was organized less around inclusive governance than around the efficient transfer of labor, land, and revenue toward imperial interests. Tax systems, legal arrangements, and property regimes were frequently designed to secure control over productive resources rather than to broaden local participation or foster autonomous institutional development. Such arrangements often privileged intermediary elites, restricted access to decision-making, and weakened incentives for broad-based investment in education, infrastructure, or productive diversification. The significance of these institutional patterns lies not merely in their short-term exploitative character, but in their tendency to shape postcolonial governance through durable asymmetries in state capacity and distributional access. Where state structures emerged primarily as instruments of extraction and control, they often left behind fragmented administrative reach, uneven public authority, and persistent concentration of wealth and political influence (Lange, 2009; Mahoney, 2010). The result was not institutional absence, but institutional formation oriented toward hierarchy rather than inclusive development.

A second finding concerns **coercive labor systems and land regimes**, which structured inequality at both the macroeconomic and social levels. Colonial economies frequently depended on labor arrangements that ranged from forced labor and indenture to racially segmented wage hierarchies and legally enforced mobility restrictions. These systems were closely tied to the expropriation or reclassification of land, which enabled colonial authorities and commercial actors to redirect agricultural production toward imperial markets while undermining local control over subsistence and accumulation. The enduring importance of this mechanism lies in the way it reshaped class relations, access to productive assets, and patterns of rural inequality. In many settings, colonial labor coercion did not simply extract work; it reordered the social basis of economic life by concentrating land, devaluing indigenous labor, and linking survival to participation in externally oriented production systems (Beckert, 2014; Cooper, 1996). These arrangements often survived independence in altered form, especially where landed elites, export agriculture, or labor segmentation remained central to national economies. Contemporary inequalities in land ownership, labor precarity, and regional underdevelopment can therefore be read, in part, as outcomes of historically institutionalized coercion rather than as purely postcolonial failures of reform.

A third finding concerns **trade dependency and unequal incorporation into the global economy**. Colonial rule did not merely connect colonized regions to international markets; it integrated them under highly asymmetrical terms. Production was often reorganized around a narrow range of export commodities, while industrial development, tariff autonomy, and control over value-added processes remained limited or externally constrained. This form of incorporation created a structural pattern in which colonized territories became dependent on volatile commodity markets and metropolitan trade networks, while the capacity to diversify or capture higher-value segments of production was systematically weakened. The consequences of this pattern extended beyond the colonial period itself. Even after formal decolonization, many postcolonial states entered global markets with inherited export profiles, external financing constraints, and unequal bargaining positions that reinforced vulnerability within the world economy (Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 1974). The key finding here is not that colonial trade structures determined all later development outcomes, but that they established asymmetrical starting positions that made autonomous development considerably more difficult. Contemporary disparities in trade power, productive sophistication, and external dependency are therefore historically linked to imperial systems that organized economic integration on subordinate terms.

A fourth major finding concerns **colonial state formation and institutional persistence**. Colonial states were typically constructed to govern populations selectively, maintain order, secure revenue, and manage access to labor and territory. Their legal and administrative structures often differentiated among populations, regions, and forms of political participation, producing uneven citizenship and fragmented state reach. These patterns mattered because the transition to independence rarely began from an institutional blank slate. Postcolonial governments inherited territorial boundaries, administrative hierarchies, legal categories, and fiscal systems that had been shaped by imperial priorities rather than by

inclusive state-building. In some cases, these inherited arrangements were repurposed effectively; in many others, they contributed to unstable authority, weak public goods provision, regional disparities, or exclusionary political settlements (Mamdani, 1996; Young, 1994). The persistence of such structures helps explain why contemporary inequality is not only economic but also institutional, expressed through uneven state capacity, differentiated access to rights, and geographically selective governance. Colonial legacies thus persisted not simply because institutions endured unchanged, but because postcolonial transformation occurred within administrative frameworks already marked by asymmetry.

These findings also indicate that the relationship between colonialism and present-day inequality is best understood as **cumulative and interactive** rather than linear. Extractive institutions reinforced coercive labor systems; coercive labor and land regimes supported export dependency; export dependency, in turn, limited the fiscal and productive bases upon which more inclusive states might later have been built. At the same time, the effects of these mechanisms varied according to imperial strategy, local social structure, ecological setting, and postcolonial political choices. The evidence therefore does not support a monocausal model in which colonialism alone explains all contemporary disparities. Rather, it supports a historically structured account in which colonial rule created durable asymmetries that were later reproduced, modified, or intensified through postcolonial governance, Cold War geopolitics, and global capitalist restructuring (Bayly, 2004; Easterly & Levine, 2016).

Taken together, the results demonstrate that contemporary global inequalities cannot be adequately explained through present-day institutional performance or market participation alone. The patterns observed across the historical record point instead to colonialism as a major structuring force that reconfigured institutions, labor, trade, and political authority in ways that constrained later development and reproduced hierarchical integration into the world economy. These mechanisms did not operate identically across all colonized regions, but they generated a common historical pattern: the systematic organization of inequality through imperial rule, followed by the persistence of that inequality in transformed but recognizable institutional and economic forms.

Discussion

The findings of this study support a historically grounded interpretation of contemporary global inequality in which **colonialism functioned as a long-term structuring process rather than as a closed episode of political domination**. Read through the combined lenses of postcolonial political economy, dependency analysis, world-systems theory, and historical institutionalism, the evidence suggests that colonial rule shaped durable asymmetries by reorganizing institutions, labor, land, and trade in ways that constrained later developmental options. What emerges most clearly is not a claim of simple continuity, but a pattern of **structured persistence**: colonial arrangements established unequal starting conditions, concentrated power and resources in particular ways, and inserted colonized territories into the world economy under subordinate terms that often remained difficult to reverse after formal independence (Wallerstein, 1974; Pierson, 2004). In this sense, the article confirms the broader theoretical proposition that historical inequality is not merely inherited in the abstract; it is reproduced through institutions and economic structures whose origins lie in earlier regimes of power.

One of the strongest implications of the findings concerns the continuing relevance of **historical institutionalist** arguments about path dependence. The results show that colonial institutions were not transient administrative devices but formative structures that shaped postcolonial distributions of authority, access, and opportunity. Their long-term impact is visible not only in weak or uneven state capacity, but also in the persistence of exclusionary political settlements, concentrated landholding, limited fiscal reach, and regionally differentiated governance. This supports scholarship arguing that colonial states often created institutional orders oriented toward extraction and control rather than inclusive development (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001; Lange, 2009). At the same time, the present analysis complicates any overly static reading of institutional persistence. The findings suggest that what persisted was not always the exact institutional form, but the **logic of asymmetry** embedded in those arrangements. Postcolonial states frequently transformed colonial structures, yet they often did so within inherited territorial, legal, and administrative frameworks that limited the scope of more egalitarian restructuring. The article therefore refines institutional persistence arguments by emphasizing adaptation within continuity rather than simple institutional survival.

The economic dimension of the findings also speaks directly to **dependency and world-systems approaches**. The evidence indicates that colonialism shaped global inequality not only through local exploitation but through systematic incorporation into a wider economic order structured by unequal exchange, commodity specialization, and restricted control over value-added production. This confirms longstanding claims in dependency theory that peripheral economies were historically organized to serve external accumulation rather than autonomous development (Frank, 1967; Rodney, 1972). Similarly, the findings resonate with world-systems analysis by showing that the position of colonized territories in the global division of labor was not accidental or temporary; it was institutionally produced and politically defended (Wallerstein, 1974). Yet the article also complicates some earlier versions of these approaches, particularly where they risk portraying peripherality as overly uniform or historically fixed. The cases and mechanisms considered here suggest considerable variation in how colonial dependency was structured and in how it interacted with postcolonial state strategies, geopolitical alignments, and later market reforms. The result is not a rejection of dependency-based explanation, but a more differentiated account in which structural subordination remains central without being treated as mechanically deterministic.

The findings likewise contribute to **postcolonial scholarship** by clarifying how colonial domination translated into enduring material inequality. Postcolonial theory has been especially effective in showing that empire was never merely administrative or territorial, but epistemic, racialized, and civilizational in its ordering of difference (Said, 1978; Chakrabarty, 2000). The present study complements that insight by showing that such ordering also had durable institutional and political-economic consequences. Coercive labor systems, legal differentiation, segmented citizenship, and the organization of production around imperial need were not simply historical expressions of domination; they were mechanisms through which hierarchy was made durable. In that sense, the article supports postcolonial arguments about the unfinished nature of empire, but it grounds that claim more firmly in historical sociology and comparative political economy. Its contribution lies in linking symbolic and political domination to the structuring of land, labor, trade, and governance, thereby showing how colonialism's afterlives are materially sedimented as well as discursively maintained.

A further contribution of the article lies in its treatment of **coercive labor and land regimes** as central to the making of inequality. Much of the literature on colonial legacies has focused either on institutions in the formal political sense or on macroeconomic outcomes, sometimes underplaying the extent to which labor coercion and dispossession shaped the social foundations of later inequality. The findings here indicate that labor control, land expropriation, and racially or ethnically stratified access to productive resources were not secondary effects of colonial rule; they were among its core developmental mechanisms. This supports work showing that capitalism's expansion under empire was often inseparable from coercion, exclusion, and legally structured social hierarchy (Beckert, 2014; Cooper, 1996). At the same time, the article avoids collapsing all contemporary class inequality into direct colonial inheritance. Instead, it shows that colonial labor and land arrangements created durable distributions of advantage and vulnerability that later political regimes inherited, reworked, or failed to dismantle. The value of this argument is that it links macro-historical inequality to social structure in more concrete terms than some broader theories of dependency or institutional persistence typically do.

The analysis also intervenes in a key debate about **causality and historical explanation**. One persistent criticism of colonial legacy arguments is that they risk attributing too much explanatory weight to a distant past while insufficiently accounting for postcolonial agency, domestic policy, or later global transformations. The present study takes that concern seriously. The findings do not suggest that colonialism alone explains contemporary inequality, nor that all postcolonial outcomes can be read directly from imperial precedents. Rather, the evidence points to colonialism as a **major conditioning force** that shaped the terrain upon which later political and economic choices were made. This distinction matters. It allows the article to argue for the enduring significance of empire without denying the importance of postcolonial governance, Cold War interventions, debt crises, neoliberal restructuring, or domestic class formation. Colonialism, in this reading, is neither a total explanation nor a residual background factor. It is a historically foundational process whose effects were mediated through later conjunctures. This interpretation complicates presentist accounts of inequality while also resisting the temptation to treat colonial history as an all-purpose causal shortcut.

This analytical caution is especially important because the historical record does not support a single, uniform colonial legacy. Imperial formations differed in administrative style, demographic pattern, economic strategy, and duration. Settler colonial regimes, concessionary extractive systems, plantation economies, and indirect rule all generated different constellations of inequality and different postcolonial dilemmas. The article's findings therefore challenge any homogenized account of colonialism as a singular mechanism with identical consequences everywhere. What they reveal instead is a family of related processes organized around extraction, hierarchy, and unequal incorporation. This is where the article's theoretical synthesis becomes useful: historical institutionalism helps explain persistence, dependency theory clarifies external asymmetry, world-systems analysis situates colonialism within global hierarchy, and postcolonial perspectives illuminate the racialized and civilizational ordering that underpinned these structures. Their integration makes it possible to explain both common patterns and historical variation without sacrificing analytical coherence.

The study's original contribution lies precisely in that **integrative explanatory move**. Rather than treating institutional legacies, trade dependency, labor coercion, and state formation as separate literatures, the article shows how they operated as interlocking mechanisms in the production of global inequality. Extractive institutions did not simply coexist with trade dependency; they facilitated it. Coercive labor systems were not only social injustices; they underwrote commodity specialization and externally oriented accumulation. Colonial state formation was not a neutral administrative inheritance; it shaped the political capacity through which postcolonial societies could respond to these inherited structures. By bringing these dimensions together in a single historical-comparative analysis, the article offers a more relational account of colonial causation than studies that isolate one mechanism at a time. Its central claim, therefore, is not merely that colonialism mattered, but that it mattered through **interacting institutional, economic, and political pathways** whose combined effects structured the uneven world that followed decolonization. At the same time, the article's scope imposes important **analytical limits**. Because the study operates at a macro-historical level, it cannot capture the full specificity of every colonial formation or every postcolonial trajectory. Nor can an interpretive historical-comparative design test causal weight with the precision of large-N quantitative work, even if it can offer richer historical explanation. There is also a risk inherent in all broad colonial legacy arguments: the tendency to foreground structures so strongly that internal differentiation within colonized societies becomes harder to see. Elites, intermediaries, and regionally uneven incorporation mattered greatly, and future work could push this analysis further by examining subnational variation or more tightly bounded comparisons. These limits do not invalidate the article's claims, but they underscore the need to treat colonialism as a historically powerful explanatory factor without converting it into a total theory of contemporary inequality.

What follows from this discussion is not a moralized restatement of colonial harm, but an analytical clarification of how **historically produced inequality became globally durable**. Contemporary disparities in wealth, state capacity, and international bargaining power are not reducible to colonial origins, yet they are also not intelligible without them. The article therefore contributes to a growing body of scholarship insisting that present-day global inequality must be understood as historically constituted. Its intervention is to show that the most convincing explanations will be those that connect colonial extraction, labor control, trade hierarchy, and institutional persistence within a single structured account, while remaining attentive to variation, mediation, and the complexities of historical change.

Conclusion

This article has argued that colonialism should be understood not as a concluded historical episode, but as a long-duration structuring force in the making of contemporary global inequality. Its enduring significance lies in the way imperial rule reorganized institutions, labor, land, and external economic relations, producing asymmetries that continued to shape postcolonial trajectories long after formal decolonization. Contemporary disparities in wealth, state capacity, and global market position are therefore better explained as historically sedimented outcomes than as the product of recent policy divergence alone.

The analysis has also shown that colonial legacies are neither singular nor mechanically deterministic. Their force resides in the interaction of extractive governance, coercive labor arrangements, dependent trade structures, and uneven state formation, all of which conditioned later development without fully determining it. By bringing postcolonial political economy, dependency-oriented analysis, world-systems

perspectives, and historical institutionalism into dialogue, the article has offered a more integrated account of how historical domination became structurally durable.

The broader significance of this argument is both theoretical and contemporary. Theoretically, it demonstrates that global inequality cannot be adequately interpreted without embedding present-day disparities in longer histories of empire and hierarchical incorporation. Analytically, it cautions against explanations that isolate current institutional performance from the historical conditions under which those institutions were formed. Reassessing colonialism in this way does not reduce the present to the past; rather, it clarifies why the past remains constitutive of the unequal world that persists.

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