

### **How far was having an Empire beneficial for other countries in the world?**

It used to be said that “the sun never set on the British Empire”. This is unsurprising as it covered 25% of the globe and ruled over 1/5 of its population. At its height, Britain’s rule included over 80 nations around the world. One little island: a huge amount of power. An Empire this large and powerful undoubtedly left behind a complex legacy of many things. How advantageous were they?

One could argue that, at the outset of Empire, the British traded fairly. For example, the British needed tobacco plants for their plantations and the Native Americans had the crop in excess. In return, whilst the various tribes had a sufficient and sustainable livelihood, the British had certain tools, as well as warmer and softer clothing that they could benefit from. This sort of trade was a mutually beneficial arrangement. However, very quickly trade turned from fair to exploitative. The British became greedy. For the native Indians this meant loss of land and health and as the Empire spread into the nearby Caribbean islands worse was to come.

Indisputably, the most deplorable actions arising from greed was the exploitation of people; the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In terms of economic wealth, the Caribbean islands became by far the most valuable and important islands in the whole empire. For example, Barbados which was once a ‘backward outpost’ became a ‘scene of the sugar revolution that made the English a nation of voracious consumers [and Barbados into the richest colony] powered by the human misery of thousands of enslaved Africans... this model of coercion and exploitation was exported around the region, producing huge wealth for a few, but creating a society poisoned by war, disease, cruelty and corruption.’ -Matthew Parker, *The Sugar Barons*.

Whichever country the British came to they saw the indigenous peoples as needing ‘enlightenment’. They thought that because the ‘native’ customs were different to British culture they needed to be ‘civilized’. Granted, some of these practices were brutal and inhumane such as human sacrifice and cannibalism and it could be argued that the British presence lessened or stopped these practices altogether.

The British also brought with them many things that they thought would help the colonies such as: democracy, a British education, infrastructure such as roads, bridges and modern medicine. However, the so called ‘benefits’ are controversial and problematic. Democracy was a false promise. The colonies had no standing in parliament and even in British society, very few people could vote. A British education wasn’t needed or always given. In fact, in the earlier days of the empire, slaves could be punished or even killed if they were found to be literate. After the emancipation of slavery, an education was given but just a white British one which led to a phenomenon known as erasure (the history and achievements of minorities not being acknowledged as much as white history and achievements) which is still affecting people today. Modern medicine was one of the few things that truly benefited the locals but ironically, this is because the British brought with them diseases that they didn’t have a strong enough immune system to fight.

Towards the end of the British empire, the whole globe was involved in World War II. Although the reasons of this war are not relevant to this essay the Empire did help its colonies somewhat in its victory. The Nazi ideology was supremacy of an Aryan race. This meant that Hitler only wanted the world to be filled with white people. The British Empire provided the extra manpower that in part helped win the war.

As a result of Empire, we are privileged to live in a multi-cultural society. However, the repercussions that came from Empire such as structural racism cannot be minimized. Even last week, with the death of George Floyd many have had to confront the legacy of Empire in their own ‘White privilege’. So how far did the British Empire benefit other countries in the world? Well any benefits cannot compensate for the disadvantages and this essay has only scratched the surface of the little-known horrors of Empire such as the Mau-Mau uprising or the partition of India. In some ways it makes me think of a poisoned sweet. Looks good on the outside and perhaps is even sweet for a time. But the bitter effects are death-dealing.