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How Colonial History Drives Modern Western Immigration Trends

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Abstract

This paper explores the structural continuity between historical European extraction and contemporary global migration patterns (Frankena, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021). Through a postcolonial and macrohistorical approach, it argues that the institutional wealth, advanced infrastructure, and high standards of living across the Global North are deeply rooted in centuries of systematic resource and labour drainage from Global South (Maddison, 2007; Tomlinson, 2022). By analysing specific historical frameworks-including France's century-long sovereignty over North and West Africa, Portugal's prolonged colonial presence in Angola and Mozambique, British economic policies in India, and the corporate mercantilism of the Spanish and Dutch empires-this study traces how metropolitan development depended on the strategic de-development of colonized peripheries (Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021; Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023; Tomlinson, 2022). Consequently, modern immigration toward the United States and Europe does not represent an isolated socioeconomic crisis, but rather a structural return of population moving along historical paths of wealth transfer (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). Upon arrival, however, these populations encounter fortified external borders and nativist racial dynamics (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). This paper concludes that contemporary immigrant rhetoric and restrictive border policies act as systemic tools to decouple the historical benefits of colonial capital accumulation from the present realities of global mobility (Frankena, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

Keywords: Migration; Postcolonialism, Capitalism; Geopolitics; Extraction; Borders

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1. Introduction: The Structural Nexus Colonial Extraction and Modern Demographics

Contemporary political discourse in Europe and the United States frequently frames international migration as an unexpected, crisis-driven phenomenon that threatens the stability of western welfare states and national cultures (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). This mainstream narrative operates on a historical tabula rasa, treating the movement of peoples from the Global South as an isolated domestic security concern rather than a predictable, structural consequence of historical trajectories (Frankena, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021). Postcolonial scholars and international political economists maintain that modern global migration patterns are deeply connected to the historical architecture of Western imperial expansion (Frankena, 2021; Maddison, 2007). The industrialisation, urban infrastructure, and accumulated capital that define the modern Global North were fundamentally subsidised by centuries of resource drainage, coercive labour systems, and structural de-industrialisation imposed upon the Global South (Basu, 2021: Maddison 2007; Tomlinson, 2022).

When individuals from formerly colonised regions cross national boundaries to seek economic security, political stability, or ecological safety in the West, their journeys follow paths established by centuries of asymmetric wealth transfer (Frankena, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021). Wealth was systematically pulled from their ancestral homelands to build the cities and financial institutions of Europe and North America (Maddison, 2007; Taylor, 2019). Yet, upon reaching these historical centres of accumulation, contemporary migrants are met with increasingly militarised borders, complex asylum restrictions, and nativist political movements (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). This social and institutional friction reveals a form of structural racism that aims to preserve the benefits of imperial wealth accumulation while refusing the human responsibilities of shared postcolonial realities (Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

This paper provides a multi-regional historical analysis of European colonial extraction to contextualise modern anti-immigrant sentiment within Western societies. The study evaluates:

- The Financial mechanisms of mechanisms of French neo-colonialism in North and West Africa (Assa, 2022; Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021).

- The labour exploitation of Portuguese imperialism in Angola and Mozambique (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023).
- The calculated destruction of indigenous manufacturing sectors, such as the Indian jute and textile industries, by British colonial authorities (Tomlinson, 2022; Watson, 2023).
- The mercantilist accumulation models pioneered by the Dutch and Spanish empires (Maddison, 2007).

By connecting historical global extraction with modern migration politics, this paper demonstrates how contemporary Western border regimes and nativist rhetorics operate as mechanisms to protect historically extracted wealth (Frankena, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

2. The Structural Mechanics of French Colonialism and Neocolonial Monetary Subjugation

2.1 The Conquest and Fiscal Drainage of North Africa

The structural integration of French North and West Africa into the metropolitan economic core provides a clear historical example of asymmetric capital accumulation (Frankena, 2021; Taylor, 2019). France's occupation of Algeria spanned 134 years from 1830 to 1962, a period defined by systematic land expropriation, the disruption of indigenous agricultural systems and the enforcement of a strict racial hierarchy (Frankena, 2021). Algerian land was violently reassigned to European settlers (*pieds-noirs*), transforming sustainable polycultural economies into export-oriented monocultural landscapes designed to serve French Domestic markets (Frankena, 2021).

This extractive framework was similarly applied across France's regional protectorates (Frankena, 2021; Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021). In Morocco (1912-1956) and Tunisia (1881-1956), mineral resources-specifically phosphates, agricultural surpluses, and industrial raw materials-were systematically requisitioned to accelerate metropolitan industrialisation (Frankena, 2021). The human and material costs of these colonial operations left deep developmental scars across North Africa, destabilising regional economics and setting up historical push-factors for subsequent migratory waves toward southern Europe (Frankena, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

3. The CFA Franc Zone and Narrative of Contemporary Financial Subordination

While formal decolonisation occurred across West and Central Africa in the early 1960s, France retained significant structural leverage over its former colonies through the architecture of the Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA) Franc zone (Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021; Taylor, 2019). Established in 1945, the CFA Franc system serves as a powerful instrument of monetary subordination (Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021). Under the classic terms of this postcolonial monetary arrangement, member states across West and Central Africa were historically legally obligated to deposit a substantial portion of their foreign exchange reserves—often up to 50%—directly into an operations account managed by the French Treasury in Paris (Gladstein, 2021; Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021). This institutional design meant that West and Central African nations could not access their own sovereign financial reserves without formal metropolitan permission, effectively prioritising French economic security over local development (Gladstein, 2021; Taylor, 2019).

The structural consequences of this framework have been extensively analysed in recent political economy scholarship (Assa, 2022; Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021). By pegging the CFA Franc directly to the French Franc, and subsequently to the Euro, the currency has remained consistently overvalued for the domestic economic contexts of developing African nations (Assa, 2022; Taylor, 2019). This overvaluation reduces the competitiveness of local exports, penalises indigenous agricultural producers, and subsidizes luxury imports consumed by urban elites (Assa, 2022; Pigeaud & Sylla, 2021). Furthermore, the absolute freedom of capital transfer out of the CFA zone encourages systemic capital flight, allowing corporate profits to be funnelled directly back to European financial centres (Gladstein, 2021; Taylor, 2019).

While contemporary institutional adaptations have been introduced under recent regional transitions, the core structural dependencies show significant continuity (Assa, 2022; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). For instance, within the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), formal steps were initiated to phase out the traditional CFA Franc framework in favour of a regional currency known as the Eco (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). This transition involved the closure of the mandatory operations accounts within the French Treasury and the removal of formal French representatives from regional central bank boards (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024).

However, despite these administrative adjustments, the underlying economic dependencies persist (Assa, 2022; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024).The new framework retains a fixed peg to the Euro, which continues to be

guaranteed by the French Treasury (Assa, 2022; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024). This fixed peg maintains the historical patterns of overvaluation and restricts the sovereign flexibility of African central banks to implement independent monetary policies, expand domestic credit, or invest heavily in public infrastructure and educational networks (Assa, 2022; Taylor, 2019). The persistence of these restrictive financial architectures limits local economic opportunities and directly fuels the socio-economic conditions that drive youth migration from West Africa toward Europe (Gladstein, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

4. Portuguese Imperialism in Angola and Mozambique: Multi-Century Resource and Labour Extraction

Portuguese colonialism in Africa is historically unique due to its long duration and intensely extractive nature (Frankema, 2021; Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). Portugal maintained an imperial presence in Angola for nearly five centuries and in Mozambique for approximately 476 years (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). It constructed minimalist, securitised states focused almost entirely on resource drainage and labour exploitation (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). Operating as an economically underdeveloped metropolis compared to its northern European counterparts, Portugal compensated for its domestic industrial weaknesses by aggressively extracting value from its overseas territories, a process described as stripping colonial societies to their core infrastructure (Frankema, 2021; Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023).

The economic mechanisms of the Portuguese Empire relied heavily on forced labour and human commodification (Maddison, 2007; Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). From the 16th through the 19th centuries, Angola and Mozambique served as major supply hubs for the transatlantic slave trade, which systematically drained these regions of millions of working-age individuals and disrupted indigenous social structures (Maddison, 2007; Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). Following the formal abolition of the slave trade, the Portuguese administration transitioned to the *chibalo* system—a regime of institutionalised forced labour (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). Under this system, indigenous Africans were legally coerced into working on settler-owned agricultural plantations, infrastructure projects, and mineral extraction sites under brutal physical conditions (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023).

In Angola, colonial extraction focused on high-value primary commodities, including diamonds, copper, oil, and agricultural products like coffee (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). In Mozambique, the colonial state functioned largely as an institutional labour reserve, exporting miners to South African industrial complexes in exchange for gold deposits transferred directly to Lisbon (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). This systematic drain of resources occurred alongside an almost total lack of investment in human capital (Frankema, 2021; Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). The Portuguese colonial state deliberately limited access to education and healthcare for the indigenous population (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). At the time of abrupt decolonisation in 1975, illiteracy rates across Angola and Mozambique exceeded 90%, leaving these newly independent nations with acute structural shortages of technical, administrative, and medical personnel (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023). The combination of long-term wealth extraction, institutional neglect, and the subsequent outbreak of proxy civil wars left deep structural challenges that continue to influence contemporary migration flows from Lusophone Africa (Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023; Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

5. British Industrial De-Development: The Systematic Dismantling of India's Jute and Textile Sectors

The economic trajectory of the Indian subcontinent under British East India Company rule and the subsequent British Raj provides a clear example of imperial de-industrialisation (Basu, 2021; Tomlinson, 2022). In the early 18th century, pre-colonial India was an industrial power, accounting for roughly 25% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and dominating international textile markets with high-quality calicos, muslins, and silks (Basu, 2021; Maddison, 2007). However, British imperial strategy altered this dynamic, systematically transforming an exporter of finished manufactured goods into a captive consumer of British industrial output and a supplier of raw materials (Tomlinson, 2022; Watson, 2023).

This structural transformation heavily impacted the Indian jute and cotton sectors (Tomlinson, 2022; Watson, 2023). Bengal held a global monopoly on jute, a natural Fiber vital for manufacturing industrial sacks, packaging materials, and shipping cordage (Watson, 2023).

Rather than permitting the development of domestic processing capacity, British colonial policies implemented highly asymmetric tariff structures (Tomlinson, 2022; Watson, 2023). Heavy export duties were levied on finished Indian textile and jute products, while British machine-manufactured goods were imported into the

Indian market with minimal barriers (Tomlinson, 2022; Watson, 2023).

Concurrently, British capital established industrial mills in Dundee, Scotland, using raw jute extracted from Bengal under coercive tax conditions (Watson, 2023). This systematically undermined the traditional artisan economy of India, causing widespread unemployment and forcing millions of displaced urban weavers back into subsistence agriculture, which increased rural poverty (Tomlinson, 2022; Watson, 2023).

Furthermore, the economic architecture of the Raj relied on a systemic drain of wealth, famously detailed via historical economic analysis (Basu, 2021; Tomlinson, 2022). Institutional mechanisms such as "Home Charges"—which forced India to fund the administrative expenses of its own colonisation, including British pensions and military campaigns outside India—transferred vast amounts of capital directly to London (Tomlinson, 2022). Estimates suggest that trillions of dollars in wealth were transferred from India to Great Britain between 1757 and 1947 (Basu, 2021; Maddison, 2007). This systemic extraction directly subsidised the infrastructure, rail networks, and urban development of British cities while leaving the subcontinent vulnerable to recurring, catastrophic famines and structural underdevelopment (Basu, 2021; Tomlinson, 2022).

6. Mercantilist Foundations: Dutch Corporate Imperialism and Spanish Conquests

6.1 The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Global Mercantilism

The urban and institutional landscapes of Western Europe's greatest historical cities were built on capital accumulated through early modern corporate imperialism and conquest (Maddison, 2007). The Dutch Republic's Golden Age was directly subsidised by the operations of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC) (Maddison, 2007).

Operating as early transnational joint-stock corporations backed by state military power, the VOC established a commercial monopoly in the East Indies (modern Indonesia) through violent interventions, forced crop cultivation, and population displacements (Maddison, 2007). The profits generated from the spice trade, coffee plantations, and regional slave labour were systematically funneled back to Amsterdam (Maddison, 2007). This concentrated influx of capital funded the construction of the city's canal networks, expanded its banking institutions, and established the Netherlands as a primary center of early global finance (Maddison, 2007).

6.2 The Spanish Empire and the Conquest of South America

Similarly, the construction of the Spanish imperial state was directly tied to the conquest and exploitation of the Americas (Maddison, 2007). Following the destruction of the Aztec and Inca empires, Spanish administrators organised large-scale silver mining operations at Potosí (in modern Bolivia) and Zacatecas (in modern Mexico) (Maddison, 2007). Utilising the *mita* system—a coercive labour framework adapted from indigenous institutions—millions of native workers were forced into hazardous mining operations (Maddison, 2007).

The extracted silver was transported across Atlantic trade routes directly to Seville and Madrid, providing the liquidity needed to fund European military campaigns, build grand urban architecture, and service royal debts (Maddison, 2007). This historical extraction set up persistent structural wealth imbalances between Western Europe and South America that continue to shape modern international mobility patterns (Maddison, 2007; Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

7. Contemporary Border Politics: Eurocentric Nativism and the Racism of Immigration

7.1 The Rise of Modern Nativist Rhetoric across the Global North

When populations from historically colonised regions migrate toward Western Europe and the United States, they encounter increasingly fortified physical and legal borders (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). In both the European Union and the United States, political discourses surrounding immigration have become highly securitised, frequently featuring xenophobic and nativist rhetoric (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). Modern political movements often frame immigration as an existential threat to national sovereignty, cultural identity, and public welfare systems (Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

In Europe, this nativism manifests through the growing electoral influence of right-wing populist parties that advocate for the sealing of external maritime borders, the criminalisation of humanitarian rescue operations, and the implementation of restrictive asylum laws (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). In the United States, similar anxieties find expression in calls for comprehensive border walls, mass deportations, and the characterisation of asylum seekers as economic liabilities (Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

8. The Decoupling of Imperial Capital from Postcolonial Migration

This contemporary anti-immigrant sentiment reflects a structural racism that aims to decouple historical imperial wealth accumulation from its long-term migration consequences (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). Nativist discourse regularly presents the high standards of living, advanced infrastructure, and stable institutions of the Global North as products of domestic ingenuity, ignoring the role that extracted colonial wealth played in building those societies (Frankema, 2021; Maddison, 2007; Tomlinson, 2022).

By framing migrants as external intruders rather than individuals moving along established historical paths of wealth transfer, modern border regimes attempt to maintain an asymmetric global order (Thym & Bornemann, 2021). They protect historically accumulated capital within the metropole while excluding the populations whose ancestors contributed to its generation (Frankema, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021). Consequently, contemporary border violence and institutional racism are not sudden deviations from Western democratic values, but rather structural mechanisms designed to insulate global wealth imbalances from the human movements generated by postcolonial realities (Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

9. Conclusion: Re-framing the Migration Debate through Restorative Justice

This research paper demonstrates that contemporary immigration flows toward Europe and the United States are deeply connected to historical patterns of Western colonial extraction (Frankema, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021). The infrastructure, capital reserves, and institutional stabilities of modern Western metropoles were systematically subsidised by centuries of resource drainage, forced labour, and deliberate de-industrialisation across Africa, Asia, and the Americas (Maddison, 2007; Tomlinson, 2022). From the persistent monetary subordination of the CFA Franc zone to the de-development of India's textile sectors and the extractive mining economies of Spain and Portugal, the Global South was systematically positioned as an economic provider for the Global North (Assa, 2022; Spierenburg & Gewald, 2023; Tomlinson, 2022).

Consequently, the current “immigration crisis” cannot be understood solely through the lens of domestic border security or contemporary geopolitical instability(Thym &Bornemann, 2021). Border walls, restrictive immigration policies, and nativist rhetoric operate as structural mechanisms to preserve historically extracted wealth within the Global North while excluding the descendants of those who generated it (Frankena, 2021; Thym & Bornemann, 2021).

To move beyond the limitations of xenophobic discourse, international policymakers must reframe migration not as an unwanted crisis, but as a predictable structural consequence of compensated colonial extraction (Frankena, 2021). Acknowledging these historical linkages is an essential step toward developing equitable migration frameworks, advancing international economic justice, and addressing the deep global wealth inequalities that shape the modern world (Assa, 2022; Thym & Bornemann,2021).

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