

Supplanting Societies: A New View of the Past

One of the most popular ways in which to view the history of the modern world is through the prism of colonialism, writes David Day.

It seems to explain so much about the origins and development of different nations and regions. The history of the American continents, for instance, was changed dramatically by the arrival of Columbus in 1492 and the forces unleashed by his arrival and by that of subsequent European conquerors. But similarly dramatic changes, at least to central America, had been unleashed by the earlier arrival of the Aztecs at the site of present-day Mexico City. And there is a limit to what colonialism can explain. The conquest of a territory by newcomers is merely the beginning of an often prolonged process of making that territory securely their own. Indeed, the process can be never-ending.

The notion of colonialism only addresses part of that process, and it does so imperfectly. Hence the need by historians and others to develop the notion of post-colonialism, which similarly struggles to explain all that it supposedly encompasses. Both notions focus primarily on the relationship between the colonies and the colonizing power, and the domination of the colonized peoples by the colonizers. But there is another, more fundamental process at work. And it is as old as human history. That is, the apparently innate drive by groups of humans to secure an incontestable claim to the territory they happen to occupy. The Aztecs had been in the process of doing that in the two centuries prior to the arrival of the Spanish, holding the pre-existing people in their thrall by the force of their military might and the power of their religion and ceremonies.

Although the Spanish were able to overwhelm the Aztecs with the force of their equally merciless military might, aided by the vengeful help of the surrounding societies and the devastating effect of European diseases, the sudden collapse of the Aztec empire was not the end of the struggle. Although defeated by the Spanish, the native peoples did not relinquish their claims to the land. Within the modern nation states of central America, the territory fought over by the Aztecs and the Spanish remains as much a contested space today, as it was prior to the arrival of the Spanish. The Mayan people of Mexico remain in a state of sputtering insurrection against their Spanish-speaking overlords in Mexico City, as they continue the centuries-long struggle to assert the primacy of their links to the landscape they inhabit. Other examples abound. Indeed, within the United States itself, great swathes of territory, from California to Texas and Florida, are as contested today between Spanish and English speakers, as they have been for centuries past.

Historians, anthropologists and practitioners of cognate disciplines need a new paradigm to help explain the complex and prolonged process of conquering and claiming territories occupied by others. The notion of supplanting societies provides such a paradigm. Its application is remarkably wide, as it encompasses all those societies which have moved onto the lands of others and have sought to make those lands their own. There are not many places in the world, other than a few islands, where this has not occurred in the past and where the problematic process is not still being played out, at least to some degree. After all, the history of the world has been, and continues to be, the history of peoples on the move.

In the popular imagination, the claiming of a 'new' territory begins, perhaps with an act of discovery or of conquest and is symbolized by the triumphant raising of a flag or other such act. The arrival of the British in Western Australia in 1829 was followed by the symbolic felling of a tree, while the Spanish explorer, Vasco Balboa, in 1513 claimed all the lands washed by the waters of the Pacific Ocean by simply wading into the waves of a central American beach and declaring it to be so. Whatever the precise nature of the act, it is meant to indicate a claim of legal proprietorship over that territory. But the mere raising of a flag is never sufficient to assure newcomers that their peremptory claim to an already occupied territory will be recognized by the pre-existing inhabitants or by other potential claimants. They also have to establish claims of effective and moral proprietorship over the territory.

Attempts to establish such claims usually occur simultaneously. It involves overlaying the territory and its geographic features with new names that have meaning for the newcomers; it involves mapping and exploring the territory and its natural features and life forms, so that the newcomers can feel that they know the place; it involves developing foundation stories that can invest the supplanting society with a strong sense of connection to the territory; it usually involves developing the resources of the territory, particularly through cultivation, in ways that are supposedly superior to those of the pre-existing people; it involves defending the territory against rival claimants, including the indigenous

people; it involves populating the place in such numbers that the supplanters feel secure in their occupation; and it invariably involves the attempted removal of the original inhabitants.

Indeed, supplanting societies are usually characterized by an imperative that impels them to remove the original inhabitants, whose presence otherwise provides a potential challenge to their occupation. Their removal is usually attempted by a variety of means, ranging from killing and expulsion to the more benign means of absorption. When the challenge posed by the remaining original inhabitants is no longer considered to be potent, their presence can even be used to help secure the claim of the supplanting society. In the late nineteenth century, Japan pointed to the presence of the Ainu people in Hokkaido in order to help ward off a possible competing claim to the island from neighbouring Russia. More recently, Canada, has moved some Inuit people back to their ancestral homeland to ensure that Canada retains its sovereignty over those frozen wastes and its resource-rich seas.

Achieving a claim of effective proprietorship often proves impossible. The supplanting society may not be able to mobilize sufficient people to secure the new territory against rival claimants, or perhaps to prevent the original inhabitants taking back their territory, as the people of Tibet are presently trying to do. Even if the supplanting society can manage to secure a claim of effective proprietorship, it does not guarantee them being able to secure a claim of moral proprietorship, as Israel is discovering to its cost. Achieving such a claim is the ultimate aim of supplanting societies, but it can take centuries and often prove elusive. In the meantime, the prolonged attempt to establish these claims does more than anything to shape the history of individual societies and of the world as a whole.

- ***Conquest: How Societies Overwhelm Others* by David Day is published by OUP.**