

Globalization from Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama until today¹

First part

Eric Toussaint

*(Translation from French: Jean-Pierre Schermann and Lorraine Buckley,
Coeditrad. Revised by Diren Valayden)*

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The beginning of Globalization goes back to the outcomes of the first voyage of Christopher Columbus that brought him, on October 1492, to the shore of an island in the Caribbean Sea. It was the starting point of a brutal and bloody intervention of European sea powers in the history of American peoples, a region of the world that had, up to then, remained insulated from regular relationships with Europe, Africa and Asia. The Spanish conquistadors and their Portuguese, British, French and Dutch² counterparts together conquered the whole geographical area, commonly known as the Americas³, by causing the death of the vast majority of the indigenous population in order to exploit the natural resources (in particular gold and silver)⁴. Simultaneously, European powers started the conquest of Asia. Later on, they completed their domination in Australia and finally Africa.

In 1500, just at the beginning of the brutal intervention of the Spaniards and the Portuguese in Central and South America, this region had at least 18 million inhabitants (some authors put forward much larger figures of close to 100 million⁵). One century later, only around 8 million inhabitants were left (including European settlers and the first African slaves). In the case of most islands of the Caribbean Sea, the whole indigenous population had been wiped out. It is worth recalling that during a long period of time, Europeans, supported by the Vatican⁶, did not

¹ This article is an expanded version of a conference given by the author in Kerala (India) on January 24, 2008 entitled « Impacts of Globalization upon poor farmers ». Participants to this conference, in majority women issued from rural background, came in response to the invitation of the Santhigram association and VAK (member of the CADTM international network) within the framework of the World Week of Global Action launched by the World Social Forum.

² One must add the Danes, who made some conquests in the Caribbean Sea, without forgetting in the North, Greenland (“discovered” several centuries before). As a matter of interest, the Norwegians had reached Greenland and Canada much before the 15th century. In particular, see the voyage of Leif Ericsson to the “Americas” at the beginning of the 11th century (he moved from Labrador to the northern part of Newfoundland) where a colony was briefly established, forgotten for a long time, in the Meadows Bay.

³ The name America comes from that of Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian sailor at the service of the Spanish crown. Indigenous peoples from the Andes (Quechuas, Aymaras, etc..) call their continent Abya-Yala

⁴ Among natural resources, one must include the new biological resources brought back by the Europeans to their countries, then diffused in the remaining of their conquests and further: maize, potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava, capsicum, tomatoes, pineapple, cocoa and tobacco.

⁵ Figures concerning the population of the Americas before the European conquest have been differently estimated. Borah estimates that the population of the Americas reached 100 million in 1500, while Biraben and Clark, in separate studies, provide estimates of nearly 40 million. Braudel evaluates the population of Americas between 60 and 80 million in 1500. Maddison adopts a much lower estimate, assuming that the population of Latin America reached 17.5 million in 1500 and reduced by more than half, a century after the conquest. In the case of Mexico, he estimates that the population went from 4.5 million in 1500 down to 1.5 million one century later (i.e. a depopulation of two-thirds of inhabitants). In this article, we adopt the conservative hypothesis as a precaution. Even within this hypothesis, the invasion and conquest of the Americas by Europeans can clearly be counted as a crime against humanity and genocide. The European powers that conquered the Americas exterminated entire peoples and the dead can be counted by the millions, most probably by tens of millions.

⁶ The Spanish and Portuguese crowns who ruled South America, Central America and a fraction of the Caribbean during three centuries used, as Catholic powers, the support of the Pope to perpetrate their crimes. One must add that, at the end of the 15th century, the Spanish crowns expelled Muslims and Jews (who did not convert to Christianity) during and following the Reconquista (that ended on January 2 1492). Jews who did not renounce Judaism, emigrated and mainly took refuge in Muslim countries within the Ottoman Empire, which showed greater tolerance towards other religions.

consider indigenous people from the Americas as human beings⁷. A convenient justification for exploitation and extermination.

Table 1: Comparison between evolution of the population in Western Europe and Latin America between 1500 and 1820 (in millions)

	1500	1600	1700	1820
Western Europe	57	74	81	133
Latin America	18	8 (*)	12 (*)	21

(*) Those two figures include indigenous people from the Americas, European settlers and slaves brought by force from Africa
Calculations of Eric Toussaint based upon Angus Madison, 2001

In North America, the European colonization started during the 17th century, mainly led by England and France, before undergoing a rapid expansion during the 18th century, an era also marked by massive importation of African slaves. Indigenous populations were either wiped out or driven outside the settlement zones of European settlers. In 1700, the indigenous population constituted three-quarters of the population; in 1820, their proportion had dropped down to 3%.

Until the forced integration of the Americas in global commerce, the main axis of intercontinental trade exchanges involved China, India and Europe⁸. Trade between Europe and China followed terrestrial and maritime routes (via the Black sea)⁹. The main route linking Europe to India (whether from the state of Gujarat in North-West India, or from Kerala and the Calicut or Cochin harbors in the South-West) passed through the Mediterranean Sea, Alexandria, Syria, the Arabian Peninsula and finally the Arabian Sea. India also played an active role in trade exchanges between China and Europe.

Until the 15th century, technical progress achieved in Europe relied upon technology transfers from Asia and the Arab world.

At the end of the 15th century and during the 16th century, trade started to follow other routes. When the Genoese, Christopher Columbus, serving under the Spanish crown, opened the maritime route towards the “Americas”¹⁰ by sailing west through the Atlantic, the Portuguese sailor, Vasco da Gama, made for India, also through the Atlantic but heading south. He sailed along the Western coasts of Africa from North to South, veering East after crossing the Cape of Good Hope in the south of Africa¹¹. Violence, coercion and robbery were central to the methods employed by Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama to serve the interests of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns. During the following centuries, European powers and their servants would systematically use terror, extermination and extortion, combined with the search for

⁷ From that point of view, the message of the Pope Benedict XVI during his trip to Latin America in 2007 is very offensive against the memory of the peoples who were victims from the European domination. Indeed, far from acknowledging the crimes committed by the Catholic Church against indigenous populations of the Americas, Benedict XVI claimed that they were waiting the message of Christ, brought by the Europeans since the 15th century. Benedict XVI should answer for his words in front of the courts of justice.

⁸ From Asia, Europeans brought back the production of silk textiles, cotton, the blown glass technique, cultivation of rice and sugar cane.

⁹ Namely the famous Silk Road between Europe and China followed by the Venetian Marco Polo at the end of the 13th century.

¹⁰ Officially, Christopher Columbus tried to rejoin Asia taking the Western route but we know he hoped finding new lands unknown of Europeans.

¹¹ Starting with the 16th century, the use of the Atlantic Ocean for traveling from Europe to Asia and the Americas marginalized the Mediterranean Sea during four centuries, until the boring of the Suez Canal. While the main European harbors were in the Mediterranean until the end of the 15 century (Venice and Genoa in particular), the European harbors open to the Atlantic gradually took over (Antwerp, London, Amsterdam).

compliant local allies. Several peoples worldwide would witness the brutal deviation of their history's course under the whips of the conquistadors, settlers and European capital. Other peoples would suffer from an even more terrible fate since they were wiped out or reduced to the situation of foreigners in their own countries. Still others were uprooted by force from one continent to another to serve as slaves.

Admittedly, prior to the 15th century of the Christian era, history had been marked on several occasions by conquests, dominations and barbarity without however touching the whole planet. What is striking of the last five centuries is that European powers started conquering the whole world and, within three centuries, interlinked (almost) all peoples of the world through brutal ways. During the same time, the capitalist logic finally succeeded in dominating all other modes of production (without necessarily eliminating them entirely).

At the end of the 15th century, capitalist commercialization of the world received a first boost, subsequently followed by others, namely the 19th century diffusion of the industrial revolution from Western Europe and the "late" colonization of Africa by the European powers. The first international economic crisis (in industry, finance and trade) exploded at the beginning of the 19th century, leading to the first debt crises¹². The 20th century has been the scene of two World Wars, with Europe as their epicenter, and unsuccessful attempts to implement socialism. In the seventies, the turn of global capitalism towards neo-liberalism, and the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet block and China have provided a new boost to globalization.

Second intercontinental voyage of Vasco da Gama (1502): Lisbon - Cape of Good Hope - Eastern Africa - India (Kerala)

After a first successful voyage to India in 1497-1499, Vasco da Gama was again assigned by the Portuguese crown to return there with a fleet of twenty ships. He left Lisbon in February 1502. Fifteen ships would have to come back while five (under the command of da Gama's uncle) would stay behind, both to protect Portuguese bases in India and to block ships leaving towards the Red Sea, thus shutting off trade between the two areas. Da Gama rounded the Cape in June, stopping in Sofala, East Africa, to buy gold¹³. In Kilwa, he forced the local sovereign to make an annual payment of pearls and gold before making for India. Off Cannanore (70km north of Calicut - today Kozhikode), Da Gama waited for Arab ships returning from the Red Sea, to seize a ship, on route from Mecca, with pilgrims and a valuable cargo. Part of the cargo was seized and the ship set on fire, resulting in the death of most of its passengers and crew. Next stop was Cannanore where he swapped gifts (gold for precious stones) with the local sovereign without making business, estimating that the price of spices were too high. He sailed for Cochin (today Kochi), stopped his ships in front of Calicut and asked the sovereign to expel the whole Muslim trading community (4000 households) who used the harbor as a base for commerce with the Red Sea.

Following the Samudri's (local Hindu sovereign) refusal, Vasco da Gama ordered the bombardment of the town, following in the footsteps of another Portuguese sailor, Pedro Cabal, in 1500. He set for Cochin at the beginning of November where he bought spices in exchange of

¹² See Eric Toussaint, *Your Money or Your Life. The Tyranny of Global Finance*. Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2005, chapter 7. The first international debt crisis occurred at the end of the first quarter of the 19th century, simultaneously hitting Europe and the Americas (it is related to the first global crisis of overproduction of commodities). The second global debt crisis exploded at the end of the last quarter of the 19th century and its repercussions affected all continents.

¹³ In coastal towns of East Africa, traders (Arabs, Indians of Gujarat and Malabar –Kerala- and Persians) were heavily involved in business, importing silk and cotton fabrics, spices and porcelain from China and exporting cotton, wood and gold. One could meet professional sailors, who were experts in the monsoon conditions of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.

silver, copper and textiles stolen from the sunken ship. A permanent trading post was established in Cochin and five ships were left there to protect Portuguese interests.

Before leaving India for Portugal, Da Gama's fleet was attacked by more than thirty ships financed by Calicut Muslim traders. A Portuguese bombardment led to their defeat. Consequently, a part of Calicut's Muslim trading community decided to base their operations elsewhere. Those naval battles clearly demonstrate the violence and criminal nature of the action of Vasco da Gama and the Portuguese fleet.

Da Gama returned to Lisbon in October 1503 with thirteen of his ships and approximately 1700 tons of spices, that is, around the same amount imported from the Middle East at the end of the 15th century by Venice. Portuguese profit margins from this trade were much larger than those of Venetians. A major part of the spices was sold in Europe via Antwerp, the major harbor of the Spanish Netherlands, then the most important European harbor.

Maritime Chinese expeditions during the 15th century

Europeans were not the only ones traveling far away and discovering new maritime routes. But they were the most aggressive and the most conquering.

Several decades before Vasco da Gama, between 1405 and 1433, seven Chinese expeditions headed West and notably visited Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, the Arabian peninsula (the Strait of Ormuz and the Red Sea), the Eastern Coast of Africa (notably Mogadishu and Malindi).

Under Emperor Yongle, the Ming marine *"included approximately a total of 3800 ships, among which were 1350 patrol boats and 1350 battle ships incorporated into defence or insular bases, a main fleet of 400 heavy battleships stationed near Nanking and 400 loading ships for cereal transportation. Moreover, there were more than 20 treasure-boats, ships equipped to undertake large scale action"*¹⁴. They were five times larger than any ship of Da Gama, 120 meters long and nearly 50 meters wide. The large boats possessed 15 watertight compartments so that a damaged ship would not sink and could be repaired at sea.

Their intentions were **pacifist** but their military force was sufficiently imposing to fend off attacks that only took place three times. The first expedition aimed towards India and its spices. Others were geared towards exploring the Eastern Coast of Africa, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

The main goal of these voyages was to establish good relationships by offering gifts and escorting ambassadors or sovereigns that were coming to or leaving China. No attempt was ever made to establish bases for trade or military purposes. The Chinese were looking for new plants for medicinal needs and one of the missions comprised 180 members of the medical profession. In contrast, during the first voyage of Vasco da Gama to India, his crew included approximately 160 men, among whom were gunners, musicians and three Arab interpreters. After 1433, the Chinese abandoned their lengthy maritime expeditions and gave priority to internal development.

In 1500, standards of living were comparable

When, at the end of the 15th Century, Western European powers launched their conquests of the rest of the world, European standards of living and level of development were no higher than those of other large areas of the world. China was unquestionably ahead of Western Europe in

¹⁴ Needham, 1971, p. 484

many ways: in people's living conditions, in the sciences, infrastructure¹⁵ and agricultural and manufacturing processes. India was more or less on a par with Europe, as far as living conditions and quality of manufactured goods were concerned (Indian textiles and iron were of better quality than European products)¹⁶. The Inca civilization in the Andes in Southern America and the Aztecs in Mexico were also flourishing and very advanced. We should be cautious when defining criteria for measuring development and avoid limiting ourselves to the calculation of GDP per capita. Having said that, even if we take this measure and add life expectancy and quality of food available, the Europeans did not live any better than the inhabitants of other large areas of the world, prior to their conquering expeditions.

Intra-Asian trade before the European powers burst onto the scene

In 1500 Asia's population was five times that of Western Europe. The Indian population alone was twice that of Western Europe¹⁷. Hence, it represented a very large market, with a network of Asian traders operating between East Africa and Western India, and between Eastern India and Indonesia. East of the Malacca Straits, trade was dominated by China.

Asian traders knew the seasonal wind patterns and navigation hazards of the Indian Ocean well. There were many experienced sailors in the area, and they had a wealth of scientific literature available on astronomy and navigation. Their navigation tools had little to envy those of the Portuguese.

From East Africa to Malacca (in the narrow straits separating Sumatra from Malaysia), Asian trade was conducted by communities of merchants who did their business without armed gunships nor heavy government intervention. Things changed radically with the methods used by the Portuguese, Dutch, English and French, serving state and merchant interests. The maritime expeditions launched by the European powers to various parts of Asia increased considerably, as shown in the table below (from Maddison, 2001). It shows clearly that Portugal was the indisputable European power in Asia in the 16th Century. The following century it was replaced by the Dutch, who remained dominant throughout the 18th Century, and the English were in second place.

Table 2: Number of ships sent to Asia by seven European countries, 1500-1800

Country	1500-1599	1600-1700	1701-1800
Portugal	705	371	196

¹⁵ In the 15th Century, Peking was connected to the areas which produced its food supplies by the Grand Canal which was 2300 km long and was easily navigated by barges thanks to an ingenious lock system.

¹⁶ There have been many debates about European gross domestic product (GDP) per head compared to the rest of the world. Estimates vary enormously according to the source used. Different authors, such as Paul Bairoch, Fernand Braudel and Kenneth Pomeranz, reckon that, in 1500, European GDP per capita was no higher than that of China and India. Maddison, who strongly opposes this view (for underestimating the level of development in Western Europe), reckons that India's per capita GDP in 1500 was \$550 (1990 equivalent) and that of Western Europe \$750. Whatever the disagreements between these authors, it is clear that in 1500, before the European powers set out to conquer the rest of the world, they had a per capita GDP that was at most (i.e. according to Maddison's deductions) between 1.5 and 2 times that of India, whereas 500 years later, the difference was tenfold. It is quite reasonable to conclude that the use of violence and extortion by the European powers (later joined by the United States, Canada, Australia and other countries with significant European immigration) were largely the basis of their current economic superiority. The same reasoning can be applied to Japan, but in a different timeframe because Japan, with a GDP per capita lower than China's between 1500 and 1800, only became an aggressive, conquering capitalist power at the end of the 19th Century. From that time on, the growth of GDP was staggering: it increased thirty-fold between 1870 and 2000 (if we are to believe Maddison). This is the period which really made the difference between Japan and China.

¹⁷ See Maddison, 2001 p.260

Netherlands	65 (a)	1770	2950
England		811	1865
France		155	1300
Other countries		54	350
Total	770	3161	6661

(a) in the 1590s

Sources: Portugal 1500-1800, data from Magalbaes Godinho in Bruijn Gaastra (1993) pp. 7 and 17; other data from Bruijn and Gaastra (1993), pp 178 and 183. The 'other countries' include Danish and Swedish merchant ships and those of the Ostend Company.

Great Britain joins the other European powers in the conquest of the world

In the 16th Century, England's main occupations outside Europe were piracy and reconnaissance trips to explore the possibility of setting up a colonial empire. The most daring act was the royal support given to Drake's (1577-80) expedition which, with five ships and 116 crew, rounded the Strait of Magellan, captured and plundered the treasure-laden Spanish ships off the Chilean and Peruvian coasts, set up useful contacts with the spice islands of the Molucca Sea, Java, Cape of Good Hope and Guinea on the way home¹⁸. At the end of the 16th Century, Great Britain scored the decisive victory which sealed its status as a naval power when it defeated the Spanish Armada off the British coast.

From that moment on, Britain plunged into the conquest of the New World and Asia. In the New World it set up sugar-producing colonies in the Carribean and, from the 1620s on, was an active participant in the trading of slaves imported from Africa. Simultaneously, between 1607 and 1713 it set up fifteen colonies of settlement in North America, thirteen of which ended up declaring their independence and becoming, in 1776, the United States, while the other two stayed within the British circle and were to become part of Canada.

In Asia, the British crown adopted a different policy: rather than settler colonies, it set up a system of exploitation colonies, starting with India. To this end, the British state granted its protection to the East India Company (an association of merchants in competition with other similar groups in Great Britain) in 1600. In 1702 the State bestowed a trade monopoly on the East India Company and threw itself into the fight for the subcontinent, which ended with the British victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757, giving them control of Bengal. For a little over two centuries, Great Britain applied an uncompromising protectionist economic policy, and once it had become the dominant economic power during the 19th Century, it imposed an imperialist free-trade policy. For example, with the help of gunboats, it imposed 'free trade' on China, forcing the latter to buy Indian opium while allowing the British to buy Chinese tea for resale on the European market with the proceeds of the opium sales.

Elsewhere, Britain extended its conquests in Asia (Burma, Malaysia), in Australasia (Australia, New Zealand...), in North Africa (Egypt), and in the Near East. As for sub-Saharan Africa, until the 19th Century, its only major interest was the slave trade. Later on, the conquest of Africa became an objective.

Goa: a Portuguese enclave in India

In India, as in other parts of Asia, the English had been preceded by the Portuguese, who conquered small parcels of Indian Territory. They set up trading posts and installed religious terrorism. As such, an Inquisition court was set up in Goa in 1560, which imposed its cruelty until 1812. In 1567, all Hindu ceremonies were banned. In just over two centuries, sixteen

¹⁸ See Maddison, 2001 p.110

thousand sentences were pronounced by the Goa Inquisition and thousands of Indians were burnt at the stake.

The British Conquest of the Indies

The British, in their conquest of India, expelled their other European rivals the Dutch and the French. The latter were determined to prevail, but they could not do so. Their defeat in the Seven Years War against the British was mainly due to insufficient support from the French state¹⁹.

To take control of India, the British systematically sought out allies amongst the local rulers and ruling classes. They did not hesitate to use force, when deemed necessary, as in the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the violent repression of the Sepoy Rebellion in 1859. They bent the local power structures to their service and generally left the local lords in place, allowing them to continue to lead an ostentatious life although the rules of the game were dictated by others (they were powerless against the British). The division of society into castes was maintained and even reinforced, which still weighs heavily on today's India. In effect, the division of society into classes and gender domination were reinforced by a division into castes, based on birth. Through taxation and unfair terms of trade between India and Great Britain, the Indian people contributed to the enrichment of Britain both as a country and in terms of its rich classes (merchants, industrialists and politicians). But the British are not the only ones who got rich: bankers, merchants and Indian manufacturers also accumulated immense fortunes. Thanks to them, the East India Company (EIC) and the British state managed to exert, for such a long time, a domination which the people profoundly rejected.

The example of the cotton industry

The quality of textiles and cotton produced in India was unrivalled anywhere in the world. The British tried to copy the Indian production techniques and produce cotton of comparable quality at home, but for a long time the results were quite poor. Under pressure, particularly from the owners of British cotton mills, the British government prohibited the export of Indian cotton to any part of the British Empire. London further forbade the East India Company to trade Indian cotton outside the Empire, thus closing all possible outlets for Indian textiles. Only thanks to these measures was Britain able to make its own cotton industry really profitable.

Today, while the British and other industrialized powers systematically apply the Intellectual Property Rights Treaty (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights - TRIPs) within the World Trade Organization, to demand payments from developing countries such as India, less than three centuries ago they had no qualms about copying Indian production methods and design, specifically in the textiles field.²⁰

Furthermore, to increase their profits and become more competitive than the Indian cotton industry, the British owners of cotton companies decided to introduce new production techniques: steam-powered machinery and new looms and spinning machines. Through the use of force, the British fundamentally changed India's development. Whereas up to the end of the 18th Century, the Indian economy exported high quality manufactured goods and could satisfy most domestic demands, in the 19th and 20th Century it was invaded by European products, particularly from Britain. Great Britain prevented India from exporting its manufactured goods,

¹⁹ See Gunder Frank, 1977 p.237-238

²⁰ The Dutch did the same with Chinese porcelain production techniques, which they copied and since then present as ceramics, faience and blue and white Delft pottery.

forced it to export increasing quantities of opium to China in the 19th Century (just as it coerced China to buy the opium) and flooded the Indian market with British manufactures. In short, it produced under-development in India.

In the second part of this article we will discuss colonial famines, triangulation, World Bank, IMF and WTO interventions, compared to the current Indian miracle, and explore some alternative paths.

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