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[Countries](#), [England](#)



Democracy, Rights, and Empire

Thesis

Europe has seen it all; revolutions, plague, recession, famine, revolts, and invasions, and this was why, when opportunity came knocking at their doors, the few powerful nations of Europe, adventured to expand and control their business interests far from their shores. In order to understand how and why this transpired, one needs to go back in time and understand Europe as it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Background

The Rise of Europe between 1500 and 1850 was largely accounted for by the growth of European nations which shared their borders with the Atlantic, and in particular, by those engaged in colonialism and transoceanic trade. Europe was the gateway to America for Asian traders, and vica-versa, and so, when economic performance among Atlantic trading nations blossomed due to their access to the Atlantic, European countries with relatively non-absolutist initial institutions experienced faster growth.

Prior to the 19th century, agriculture played an important role in the lives of Europeans. There was discrimination between the rich and poor. The poor had to work in the land held by the rich to make a living. There was a long period during which the wage-land rent ratio declined, that implied that there was a rise in inequality. Farmland owners were far closer to the top of the income distribution than were landless workers. At some point in the 19th century this pattern reversed, and wages started to rise relative to land rents, implying a decline in inequality. This pattern soon changed and the

traditional link between factor prices and factor endowments was broken sometime in the 19th century.

Then, there was the industrial revolution. It was evident that with trade beginning to grow due to their proximity to the Atlantic, the European nations could not hold back on development. Industrial revolutionary forces led to a leap in living standards in growing industrialized nations. Though the exact date or period is elusive, many scholars date the first industrial revolution in Europe from 1760, while some cited this to be from 1780. There were others who disagreed with this altogether, but everyone were unanimous in their conclusion that, these changes came about due to the technological advance accelerated in English industry about this time.

Those who stood to gain became very rich by 17th- and 18th-century standards in Europe, and were without doubt politically and socially very powerful. What was surprising was that these changes did not take place in countries with highly absolutist institutions, such as, Spain, Portugal, and to a large extent France. The monarchy was able to suppress any political arising and control the expansion of trade. They along with their allies were the main beneficiaries of the early profits from Atlantic trade and plunder; with groups favouring change in the political arena not becoming powerful enough to induce change.

As Colonial expansionism became the focus of many European countries, commerce had a big hand in pushing this initiative. The countries in Western Europe accumulated capital through commerce, colonial plunder, slave trade, and farming. The European traders reached far corners of the globe in their quest and they began to specialize in trading and production of

consumer items such as sugar, coffee, spices, fabrics, salted fish, fur, and timber. While the production of consumer items expanded in the colonies, giving way to their colonial expansion, the effects of these measures led to the downfall of other subsistence economies in Europe and the rest of the world.

During 1800-1890, industrialization was at its peak, and the industrial capital was Western Europe. A particularly important feature of this phase of development was a change from protectionism to free trade and competition. The victory of the manufacturing class over the landowners and mercantile bourgeoisie in repealing restrictive trade practices, such as the corn laws in Britain (which meant lower costs of production), marked the victory of the free traders. The title 'Atlantic traders' referred to Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, who were directly involved in trade and colonialism with the New World and Asia. These nations maintained a rigorous attitude towards trade and expansionism. These countries, because of their proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, traded far and wide, to Asia and Americas. They were very aggressive and wanted to expand their presence around the world and were involved in colonialism- and slavery-related activities as well as trade. The Rise of Europe between 1500 and 1850 is largely due to the Rise of Atlantic Europe.

The path to development and growth has not always remained the same. The dynamics of accumulation, the agents of expansion, and opposition have not always been the same. There has been a great difference in the various phases of the development of capitalism through this period. We note that different rules and regulations were employed by the European nations in

their quest for expansion (Aglietta 1979; Lipietz 1987/88). The great ancient empires relied so much on sea power. Europe used the one resource that gave it an advantage, namely its skill in shipbuilding and navigation, to create something quite unprecedented; seaborne empires. When trading possibilities proved disappointing or local populations proved hostile, Europeans turned to conquest (expansionism), along with forced extraction of resources. “ When one thinks about the expansion of Europe we often conflate an oceanic presence or a bounded presence on an island or a littoral, with continental territorial control,” wrote Mancke.

But this didn't come easy for the Europeans. They found a foe racing in the East. The rise came from the Muslim world dominated by the Ottoman Empire. In order to create a win-win situation, the major European countries agreed to share and recognize each other's sovereign needs and interests. Thus was born the Quadruple Alliance Pact of 1815. The Quadruple Alliance of 1815 agreed in principle to allow the unqualified acceptance of the Empire into the European state system and to respect the integrity and independence of the Ottoman Empire. Britain didn't want any hindrances to its free-flowing trade with the Far East, and the Ottoman Empire controlled a very sensitive passage of the route through which raw materials and other commodities reached Britain from Asia, the Black Sea.

Analysis

“ The struggle between Liberty and Authority dominated the landscape of history, particularly with reference to Greece, Rome, and England” writes Mill (2001, p. 6). Britain had a history of wars. She went about conquering countries after countries and expanding her Majesty's reign across the

Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa. It was not until 1815, years after the French Revolution that lasted well over two decades, did Britain, which could least afford any further aggression with her neighbours, amend her foreign policy toward her neighbours and seek a peaceful and cordial co-existence. The bloody revolution left a trail of dead bodies and culminated in the toppling of the old French monarchy and the rise of civilian administrations. The Bourbon dynasty ruled France for almost two hundred years and France did well under Louis XIV, the Grand Monarch. He was a dictator. He proclaimed that, “ I am the State, and the sovereign authority of this country is vested in my person. The legislative powers exist in myself alone My people are one only with me, and national rights and national interests are combined with my own and only rest in my hands.” Having lived under the shadow of suppression and oppression for long, the bourgeois or the middle class commoners of France took to the streets and revolted against the monarchy. The French revolution had begun.

Estates

The French never enjoyed any democratic freedom. They were a suppressed lot. Their social life before the Revolution was “ antiquated, irrational and oppressive.” There was widespread corruption and harassment. The French society itself was divided and lacked the basic principles of equality. Inequality was conspicuous; for a country that had a little over 20 million people, they were “ divided into three classes or estates, as they were known. The clergy held the higher estate, the nobility came next, and the commoners belonged to the lowest estate.”

Even though the clergy and nobility constituted only one per cent of the total

population of France before the Revolution, they were the only estates who could own majority of the land in France, and collect special feudal and church dues from the commoners. They were also exempted from paying certain tax, and were close to the ministers of the King. With so much luxuries provided to them, they also received special benefits while administering the law. The clergy was rich and powerful, and lived a very luxurious life in palaces and monasteries.

They could indulge in atrocity without facing charges. They would enforce themselves on the lower classes of society to such an extent that they were finally targeted for their malicious behaviour. They displayed, “cruelty of disposition, malice and ill-nature, dissimulation and insincerity, resentment, and love of domineering over others” (Mill, 2001, p. 72). The underprivileged estate was made up of the commoners. Here too, there was division, with the bourgeoisie making up the middle class, followed by the artisans and finally, the peasants. The bourgeois or the middle class “comprised of lawyers, physicians, teachers, merchants, bankers and entrepreneurs, many of whom were rich, intelligent, energetic, and well educated.” The artisans were comparatively a smaller group and lived in town and cities where industries existed. The peasants formed the majority of the third estate, because of which, agriculture did well. The majority of peasants worked in bonded labor and resented the harsh treatment meted out to them by the upper classes. With absolutely no cover or protection, they were the most abused lot. They were taxed the most, and had to even pay indirect taxes like the gabelle (salt tax). When the Revolution ended with the victory of the people over the monarchy, there was widespread jubilation and happiness.

The power was passed on to the civilians, who would select and elect the people to run the government.

Reflecting on the freedom France got through the revolution, and knowing that true value of freedom could only be good if her people experienced it for a long time, Burke wrote, “ I will suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France, until I am informed how it had combined with government, with the public force, with the discipline and obedience of the armies, with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue, with morality and religion, with the solidity of property, with peace and order, with civil and social manners.” This is true democracy. This should invoke the spirit of nationalism and formulate policies for that nation. MacMillan (2010, p. 82) in *The Uses and Abuses of History*, quotes Renan as saying, “ A nation is a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbour.” The French Revolution didn’t take place because of this; it took place because its citizens were ill-treated by the monarchy and their freedom curbed. The atrocities had reached such a point that the people could no longer tolerate this punishment that they revolted. Britain joining the war against France was not because of her altruism. A peaceful France could mean opening up new ways to increase her economic position. Britain depended largely on trade for survival and her colonies provided it with the raw materials to support manufacturing companies in Britain.

Economic Traditionalism and British Imperialism

Britain’s diplomacy with the emerging European states was a move to protect her trading interests, which spanned from Vienna to Athens in Greece. Since she had trade interests as far away in Asia, who were

supplying her with raw materials and other goods, Britain had to have a safe shipping route and she couldn't have enemies along this route, so she wanted peace. With her focus on trade and industrialization, Britain played a key role in maintaining a balance of power in Europe that no single European country could emulate. Therefore, to have her way, " Britain signed the Treaty of Paris in 1815 to curtail the ambitious overtures of the three most important countries in Europe at that time; Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary" (Waheb, n. d). The treaty which was settled at the Congress of Vienna, made sure that there was no further wars in Europe which involved France or other " allies of Britain, which included Russia, Belgium, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, Austria and Sweden" (Burbeck, 2003). All these countries had a coastline and this was an important aspect which made Britain sign this treaty with them, cause Britain could least afford to guard her cargo ships which were sailing through this route on a regular basis. Things began to look up for Britain as the treaty not only helped it avoid spending money and might on wars, but also concentrate on a policy which focused on market-oriented, as the Industrial Revolution speeded up the necessity to import cheap raw materials and improve trade. Britain was guilty of proceeding in an expansionism policy.

The influence of Atlantic trade; the opening of the sea routes to the New World, namely, Africa and Asia, and the building of colonial empires contributed to the process of the British Empire's rapid expansion and growth during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was during this period that one witnessed, not only through its direct economic effects, but also indirectly by inducing fundamental institutional changes that Britain

prospered. Through its rigorous initiatives in Atlantic trade, Britain altered the balance of political power. It strengthened its commercial interests outside its royalty. Britain contributed to the emergence of political institutions protecting merchants against royal power. The tendency for institutional change to emerge became more evident in societies which already had checks on royal power than in countries with absolutist regimes and monarchy-controlled trade monopolies. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that, while Europe went through unprecedented turmoil and catastrophes, when they were presented with opportunities, a few of them, Britain included, adventured to expand and control their business interests.

Conclusion

During the period 1500-1800, the world saw the expansion of trade beyond the borders of most Western European nations. Countries like Britain, Spain, Netherlands, Portugal, and France began to explore the other side of the world through the sea. The Atlantic was a convenient way for these European traders to reach beyond boundaries. Their expertise in ship-building helped them establish trading ports in Africa and Asia. However, when the local population of the African and Asian countries began to revolt, the European traders with the help of their respective rulers began to exploit and embark on a conquest policy. This way, some of the Western European nations, including Britain, Portugal and the Netherlands began to show their ascendancy in forging expansionism roles.

It was from its mastery of the seas, not land, that Europe experienced its first great economic boom. The wealth accumulated through its archipelagic empires of access found its way back to Europe, partly to be invested in

land, partly to capitalise new industrial enterprises that would ultimately overturn the old order of things. By the late eighteenth century the boundary between land and sea became more definite and during the nineteenth century new nation states concentrated their energies on their own interiors. The European plunderers forced many Asian and African peasants to bonded labour and took back with them all possible resources available. The signing of the 'Three Emperor's League' in 1881, showed that the nations of the region were slowly using their foreign offices to dispel differences and involve each other in direct dialogues. But, Britain and France were both on a mission to expand their empires. While France conquered Algeria and occupied Tunisia and a large part of Indo-China, Britain took Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaya, while occupying Egypt and consolidating their rule in India and Burma. Because of the pace at which these two countries were expanding their territorial presence and interests, two countries which had no territorial advantages and thought that they too should start for the sake of their reputation and prestige; Italy and Germany, began to show aggressive intent.

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