

The the injustices of imperialism – based essay



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The imperialists' adoption of the myth of Hercules and the many headed Hydra to their cause is problematic and flawed. Firstly, there is nothing Herculean about the imperialist agenda of expansion and economic exploitation. Secondly, far from being the devilish and much maligned mythic creature that is the Hydra, those represented by it are mostly victims of imperial conquest. In other words, the various groups of colored people, revolutionaries and the progressive-minded who comprise the Hydra are actually the ones who are Herculean in their courage and intent. Hence, it is easy to see the problem of usurping an ancient mythological dichotomy of 'Good v Evil' and applying it incorrectly to promote an imperial agenda. This essay will flesh out the thesis that, 'based on first-hand accounts of John Smith and Richard Frethorne, the analogy between the heroic labors of Hercules and the enterprise of imperialism is misleading at best and malicious at worst'.

Let us begin the task of de-mystifying this myth by turning to a few key firsthand accounts of life under the Crown's orders. The firsthand experiences of Captain John Smith are testimony to the misery and acute poverty of the assigned Hydras. Far from being venomous and hazardous as the many-headed beast, the subjects of the colonies were exploited to the utmost. Even their bare survival was a matter of chance at times. As Captain Smith notes in the beginning of his journal entry

" Being thus left to our fortunes, it fortun'd that within ten days scarce ten amongst us could either goe, or well stand, such extraeme weaknes and sickness oppressed us... our allowance was somewhat bettered, by a daily

proportion of Bisket, which the sailors would pilfer to sell, give, or exchange with us, for money, Saxe-fras, fures or love.” (Smith, p. 110)

It is impossible to believe that such famished subjects as the servants of the imperial crown would later be brandied under the term Hydra when they revolted in the name of fairness and justice. To illustrate, let us consider the dire shortage of vital resources faced by Captain Smith and his team of expeditioners as they went about to fulfill the Crown’s command. The acute short of food for the sailors on imperial mission is well captured in the following lines:

“...that indeed he allowed equally to be distributed, and that was halfe a pint of wheat, and as much barley boyled with water for a man a day, and this having fryed some 26 weekes in the ships hold, contained as many wormes as grains; so that we might truly call it rather so much bran then corne, our drinke was water, or lodgings Castles in the ayre: with this lodging and dyet, our extreame toile in bearing and planting Pallisadoes, so strained and bruised us, and our continuall labour in the extremitie of the heat had so weakened us...those that escaped, lived upon Sturgeon, and Sea-crabs, fiftie in this time we buried...” (Smith, p. 110)

Hence, it is becoming clear that the imperialists have employed the rhetoric of the Herculean myth to express their difficulties in containing a form of economic globalization instituted by imperialism. Rather than reacting to a genuine threat of offence, colonial elites have instead been assigning the taint of the Hydra to whichever group that contested their authority.

(Linebaugh & Rediker, 2000) As first-hand testimonies of colonial officers and

historians prove, the claim for Herculean virtues and the imposition of bestial vices to the two groups is arbitrary, propagandist and largely a matter of convenience for the rulers. It is no surprise then, that, only those with vested interests in promoting imperialist rule were the most vocal in the dissemination of the myth. But when we take into account the voices of the weak and subordinate, a totally different picture emerges. The Experiences of an Indentured Servant is a moving and saddening piece of emotional outpouring. Written by indentured laborer Richard Frethorne to his parents, the letter captures the conditions and feelings of those ruled in the Virginia of early 17th century.

“ And I have nothing to comfort me, nor is there nothing to be gotten here but sickness and death, except that one had money to lay out in some things for profit. But I have nothing at all no, not a shirt to my back but two rags, nor clothes but one poor suit, nor but one pair of shoes, but one pair of stockings, but one cap, but two bands...So that I have not a penny, nor a penny worth, to help me too either spice or sugar or strong waters, without the which one cannot live here.” (Frethorne, 1623, p. 2)

In the case of Richard Frethorne and his lot, the conditions were precarious right from the beginning of their long voyage by sea. Even on land, some of them barely managed to survive while others were not even that lucky. Jamestown, which was one of the stationing towns for indentured laborers, was witness to many stories of agony and misery among the imported wage workers. Most of the work centered on import and export activities from the port. Work often began at the break of dawn and went on till midnight, hardly giving laborers enough time for rest and recuperation. Whether it

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rained or shined, the workers were mercilessly held to account for their contract, which was acutely inhuman by any measure. (Frethorne, 1623, p. 3)

The hostile conditions for indentured laborers and other subjects of the empire were highlighted by researchers Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker. They lay out some valid reasons exposing the flimsy claims of the myth in the first chapter of their book. They note that it is all too convenient to get carried away by the effervescence of the myth, without paying critical attention to the reality. For example, the kind of turbulence awaiting sailors ashore is resonantly captured thus:

“ On July 25, 1609, the sailors of the Sea-Venture scanned the horizon and spotted danger. Separated from their convoy of eight other vessels sailing from Plymouth westward to Virginia, England’s first New World colony, they spied a tempest- or what the Carib Indians called a hurricane – scudding swiftly toward them...” (Linebaugh & Rediker, 2000, p. 8)