

The British and the Spanish Empires Today (Parts 1 and 2)

Are all cultures equal? Over time, will different cultures achieve the same personal freedoms for its people? Will they produce comparable economic conditions? Will they maintain similar cultural and governmental stability? When we think of culture, we tend to focus on food and language. However, there is more to culture than what we eat and how we speak. While it is difficult to evaluate a culture at any moment, it becomes easier with the passage of time. Time tends to magnify small differences in culture, and allows us to examine how cultures progress over multiple generations.

Few people think about our origins anymore, but the Americas (all of North, Central, and South America, which were called the “New World” and the Western Hemisphere) are primarily the offspring of two large empires – the British and the Spanish. It is true that the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, and even the Russians also made cultural contributions here. However, the British and the Spanish influence in the Western Hemisphere are the most demonstrable and enduring.

I will never pretend to be an historian, but I certainly know enough history to see a rather glaring, remarkable divide. One glance at a map of the Americas reveals two countries that stand out: the United States and Canada. Both of these wealthy, modern economic countries are daughters of the British Empire.

From the United States’ southern border to the tip of South America (which encompasses all of what is called Latin America), we witness countries that are subject to varying degrees of poverty. Ignore the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of countries like Mexico. GDP is a deceptive number, since population indirectly determines it, and it does not reveal economic disparities within a country. Excluding Brazil (which was Portuguese), Latin America’s impoverished countries are primarily the daughters of the Spanish Empire.

The economic conditions and quality of life between the United States and Canada, and the rest of Latin America, are so dramatically different that it begs the question: How on Earth did this happen?

What are the reasons for the divide? Can serendipity explain it all? Do the United States and Canada merely reside on a land abundant with precious raw materials they use to generate wealth? If so, why does it just happen to coincide with the geopolitical line that separates the U.S. from Latin America? Are there few or no natural resources in

Latin America? Is the land simply barren throughout?

Some still claim today that the United States immorally built its wealth on slave labor. However, slavery was ubiquitous in the Western Hemisphere – with Brazil recognized as the country that imported the most slaves. Name any country in the Americas, and it was undoubtedly involved in the slave trade. Slavery was an abomination, but it was an abomination committed by everyone in the New World. Consequently, slavery could not be the reason that the United States and Canada enjoy so much more prosperity than Latin America.

Are Canada and the United States just merely fortunate anomalies in the Western Hemisphere? How do the island nations fair? Most of the islands have complicated histories, sometimes passing from the rule of one empire to another. Therefore, it is difficult to assess them or place them within the historical confines of any of the European empires.

However, there are exceptions. Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean Sea, was part of the Spanish Empire for centuries until the Spanish-American War of 1898. Two other islands in particular stand out for their successful economies and quality of life: Bermuda and the Bahamas. Historically, the Bahamas were primarily under British rule, and Bermuda is still a British territory.

It is difficult to dismiss the contrast between the lands that were once under British rule and the lands that were once under Spanish rule. While all countries face social and economic challenges, the examples above seem to demonstrate that British influence instilled something in the culture that allowed people to prosper, order to flourish, and poverty to diminish.

This is not to suggest that everywhere the British ruled, prosperity and modernity exists today. Modern day Belize was once named British Honduras, and Guyana was once British Guiana. Jamaica was also under British rule for centuries. None of these countries are economic giants today. However, virtually anywhere we see prosperity in the Western Hemisphere today, we could wager that those lands were once primarily under British rule. Conversely, the Spanish Empire left no present day country that is prosperous today.

Outside of the Western Hemisphere, we observe more British success stories, and another Spanish failure.

In Oceania, the British Empire gave us Australia and New Zealand. The majority of Australia is either desert or semi-arid land, while New Zealand has a very low percentage of arable land. Despite these limitations, both countries have modern, developed economies. If you

consider all the poverty in Asia (and the Pacific) surrounding these two countries, it makes their success even more surprising.

In addition, two of the most remarkable British success stories involve the small Asian islands of Singapore and Hong Kong. These two islands possess few natural resources, and are part of the four Asian Tigers or Dragons – Asian lands with modern, developed economies (the other two “Tigers” are Taiwan and South Korea). Neither Singapore nor Hong Kong possesses the vast deposits of precious minerals and oil found in Mexico, or the fertile farmland found in the South American Pampas. Nevertheless, they are economic success stories.

Consequently, even halfway around the world, British influence allows two islands with few natural resources to achieve economic prosperity in the midst of Asian poverty.

The Spanish also colonized Pacific Islands, but today none of them matches the success of the British islands. The largest of the Spanish possessions were the Philippine Islands. A Spanish colony, ceded to the U.S. after the Spanish-American War, the Philippines is still a poor, developing country.

Some might argue that the British Empire succeeded because it tended to rule large countries, which might possess a natural advantage. Canada, the United States, and Australia come to mind, since they are three of the largest countries in the world. However, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, and Bolivia are also very large (larger than New Zealand), and despite some economic success, they struggle with varying degrees of poverty. In addition, the British have fared well even on small islands.

At any one moment in time, the differences between the cultures may not seem that large. For example, Argentina was once considered an economic rival of the United States. Mexico has made great strides, and always seem to be just another decade or two from becoming an economic power in their own right. To be fair, former British territories also undergo periods of civil unrest and economic recession, so they are far from achieving utopia. Nevertheless, over time – centuries in fact – the small differences accumulate, and both potential and dreams are realized or they remain just potential and dreams. In the British world, many of those dreams were achieved, while the Spanish world is still hoping for a better future, based on their potential.

From countless Pacific islands, through the subcontinent of India, much of the Mid-East, parts of Africa, and the New World, the British left an indelible mark that remains today. It is true that many of these areas stubbornly remain in poverty, and economic and political

turmoil. And, like every other colonial power, the British failed to make much of an enduring, positive economic impact in Africa. So, it is not true – nor am I implying – that wherever the British went, success and wealth followed.

It is true, though, that when we compare the daughters of the two great empires, wherever there are people experiencing economic success, they are usually former subjects of the British Empire. However, it does not just begin and end with economic wealth. Most of the Spanish world suffers not only from poverty but also from revolution and political instability.

Compare the Spanish countries of Latin America with the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. In the British world, we find more political stability, stable currencies, and governments run by elected officials. In the Spanish world, there are more ambitious generals and elected “strong men” sometimes usurping the law to acquire power. Victorious political parties far too often squelch dissent by shutting down opposition newspapers and television stations, arresting political opponents and journalists, and openly rewarding political allies while punishing political foes. If you are still unconvinced that a disparity exists between these two cultures, then a basic human need requires you to answer a critical question: In which of the aforementioned countries would you trust the drinking water?

So what exactly are the reasons for these differences in affluence, and political and cultural stability? Is it law? Custom? Language? Food? Type of government? Patriotism? Religion? Resources? Education? British discipline versus Spanish Machismo?

Perhaps it is neither the type of government nor the wording of laws that matter, but in the British world, there is greater faith that laws will be upheld. Perhaps it is not necessarily patriotism, but faith in their fellow citizens – if people believe that everyone else in their country cheats to get ahead, they too will be more likely to cheat, and kickbacks and bribery become part of the culture. Perhaps there is more emphasis on hard work, personal responsibility, and devotion to education in the British culture, which produces a higher standard of living over time.

Religious beliefs tend to define a people and a culture, and play a major role in how that culture evolves. In Christianity, distinct denominations will stress some Biblical passages and aspects of their faith over others. Some cite hard work and sacrifice, while others stress equality, humility, and spirituality over materialism. Perhaps the differences between Protestantism (as practiced by the British)

and Catholicism (as practiced by the Spanish) left spiritual seeds that evolved differently over time.

The sources for these disparities are probably a complicated mixture of many factors. However, it is clear that disparities do exist. Whatever the reasons for the demonstrable differences between the daughters of these two great empires, it is unmistakable that culture matters. Culture is more than just the spoken language, the unique artistry, food preparation, or traditional entertainment of a people. Over time, a country's culture determines its economic success, the rule of law, and political and social stability. Consequently, while each culture is unique and noteworthy, ultimately, not all cultures are equal.

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