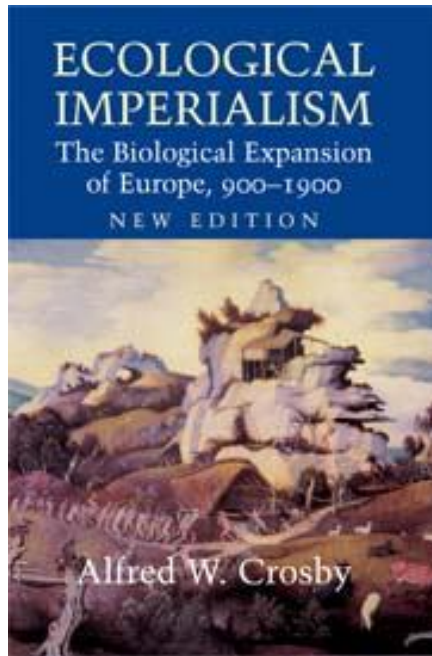


BOOK REVIEW

Ecological Imperialism by Alfred W. Crosby



Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900

Author: Alfred W. Crosby,
Cambridge University Press,
Paperback, 368 pages, 1986.

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The book is the Winner of the 1987 Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize awarded by Beta Kappa.

Review by
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The earth has witnessed many ecological disasters. One of such has been described by Crosby in his book. In this disaster the ecosystem people were either eliminated or have been simply converted to ecological refugees. The book being a precious one for the intellectuals working in the field of environment and history of humanity has been widely read and referred. The book is also used as a hand book by those who deal with history of human society. Crosby is basically a teacher and researcher in natural history. During his academic career he taught at Albion College, the Ohio State University, Washington State University, and finally the University of Texas at Austin. He retired from the University of Texas in 1999 as Professor Emeritus of Geography, History, and American Studies.

Alfred W. Crosby was born in Boston in 1931. He graduated from Harvard College in 1952 and served in the U. S. Army 1952-1955, stationed in Panama. After his army service he earned an M.A.T. from the Harvard School of Education and a Ph.D. in history from Boston University in 1961. His dissertation was published as his first book, *America, Russia, Hemp, and Napoleon*, a study of relations between Russia and the U.S.A. from the time of the American Revolution through the War of 1812.

The book has eleven chapters namely Pangaea revisited, The Neolithic reconsidered, The Norse and the Crusaders, The Fortunate Isles, Winds, Within

reach beyond grasp, Weeds, Animals, Ills, New Zealand and Explanations other than Prologue and Conclusion. It has also an Appendix on the spread of smallpox, a deadly disease that devastated the Australian aborigines in 1789.

Imperialism, defined by *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, is "the creation and maintenance of an unequal economic, cultural and territorial relationship, usually between states and often in the form of an empire, based on domination and subordination.

The ideas of imperialism put forward by historians John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson during 19th century European imperialism were influential. They rejected the notion that "imperialism" required formal, legal control by one government over another country. "In their view, historians have been mesmerized by formal empire and maps of the world with regions colored red. The bulk of British emigration, trade, and capital went to areas outside the formal British Empire. A key to the thought of Robinson and Gallagher is the idea of empire 'informally if possible and formally if necessary.'

The term imperialism should not be confused with 'colonialism' as it often is. Edward Said suggests that imperialism involved "the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory". He goes on to say colonialism refers to the "implanting of settlements on a distant territory". Robert Young supports this thinking as he puts forward that imperialism operates from the centre, it is a state policy, and is developed for ideological as well as financial reasons whereas colonialism is nothing more than development for settlement or commercial intentions.

Homo sapiens have been successful in invading different ecosystems of the world even by pushing individuals of its own species. "We're a pushy species", Dr. Crosby observes. Human beings (*Homo sapiens*) push each other around. And the human beings have done the same with everything else as we have migrated all over the planet. But humans did not travel alone. We had company, what Dr. Crosby calls our "portmanteau biota" (A portmanteau is a kind of suitcase.). New Zealand's flora and fauna was radically altered.

Nature comments "Crosby has unfolded with great power the wider biopolitics of our civilization.". *Natural History* praised the work of Crosby and stated that "The biological bases of radically changing historical ecosystems must never be forgotten--and Crosby has made them intelligible as well as memorable." *The Times Literary Supplement* argues that "Crosby argues his case with vigour, authority, and panache . . . 'Ecological Imperialism' could not ask for a more lucid and stylish exponent."

Colonialism and commercialisation has a disastrous effect on environment. Perhaps the success of European imperialism has a biological and ecological component (Crosby, 1987). Crosby has also found that wherever Europeans migrated they carried species (plants), animals, pathogens and

weeds with them. Today, most of the weeds of the southern part of Australia, where most of the continent's population lives, are of European origin. Sixty per cent of the more important farmland weeds in Canada are European. In India also the process of destruction of Himalayan forest ecology started as the part of imperialistic exploitation of the third world. The one aspect of the deteriorating forest ecology is the large-scale replacement of natural forests by the plantation of only commercially profitable trees, which actually has started during colonial era. These man-made forests are not capable of working in the same way as the natural forests for maintaining the ecological balance. In some instances they may injure the environment positively. Some species of *Pinus* and some other species like *Cryptomeria japonica* (*dhupi*) were planted by the colonial forest managers for its quick growing nature and commercial success without caring the ecological acceptability.

It is often told that Crosby was not a Marxist because—as some body put it—he was not that much of an optimist. But he through the examples put in his book proved how the invader Europeans could be able to tide over the adverse periods by exploiting the natives of the invaded new world. This invasion of others' territory till extinction of the native species even the humans is what Crosby called as imperialism. According to him ecological imperialism has been monitored by the Europeans and not a natural one.

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