

From the Kitchen

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Millions of people are still suffering from the colonial and imperial activities of European governments from the fifteenth through to the twentieth century. Territories were seized and the people living there were subjugated, often with disastrous results for their cultures and livelihoods.

Most of Africa and the Americas and much of Asia and the Middle East were placed under the various thumbs of foreign powers and their commercial agencies. The motives were partly greed and partly strategic and sometimes merely because they could. The original inhabitants were often described by the conquerors as having less valuable cultures than their European 'betters', often viewed as curiosities and even shipped back as exhibits for the titillation of gawping spectators.

Often these European powers were at war with each other and, in any case, they were continually competing for new dominions to expand their reach, politically and commercially. They frequently ignored local political, ethnic and economic realities, drawing borders as it suited them. There could be devastating consequences for the locals – communities were routinely divided by the stroke of a pen.

As the European hegemony was reduced because of shrinking fortunes and changes in political attitudes at home, the colonies and territories were abandoned, with the awful fragmentation of communities still in place.

Apart from the foreign-imposed borders cutting through social and ethnic groupings, they frequently also *enclosed* disparate groups – groups that frequently were at war with each other but had also been able to keep their distance in 'peaceful' times. While the foreigners held power in these artificially-created geographic entities, they were able to keep things controlled, even using any local enmities for this purpose. When they left, those groups, who at the best of times couldn't stand each other, were left without any controlling, dampening external force. Sometimes they were ethnically different, sometimes they belonged to the same ethnicity but split by allegiances to different chiefs or warlords.

If, for instance, you could see a map of Africa showing the 'natural' distribution of communities in 1700 and then overlay it with a political map of present-day Africa you would see that in many places there is no agreement between the two.¹ You would find the same with a similar exercise for the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. This is true also in Europe itself, where arbitrarily drawn and redrawn borders divide or enclose communities with little regard for 'natural' allegiances, sympathies and enmities.

When you add to all this the tendencies, in our time as in the past, for powerful nations to install or support already-installed despots, and you have the basis for much of the international and national violence we see in the world.

We saw a similar process of the arbitrary redrawing of boundaries of Melbourne and rural municipalities by the State government in the 1990s, although it did not result in violence.

Some 210 municipalities were amalgamated into 78. If it had been a simple exercise of combining municipalities intact, it would not have had the divisive results that emerged. In many cases, existing municipalities were split into two or even three areas, each going to a new grouping. As a consequence, some people belonging to a local social club might find that they were no longer entitled to meet at the local elderly citizens' club rooms with the people they had known for years, because they didn't live in the new municipality that now owned the rooms. If they wanted to be in the 'local' social club they would have to join the one in the municipality in which they now lived. Some of these people may have been reliant on private transport from people who lived nearby but who still attended the social club they used to all belong to. People had similar changes forced on them in relation to which library or infant welfare centre they could go to.

We are all subject to arbitrary changes brought about both by natural events and by our fellow humans, sometimes with minor inconveniences, sometimes with disastrous ones. We can do little, if anything, about the natural events, but those brought about by human whim can be avoided if we have the will to curb the exercise of power that allows it. Is such arbitrary use of power ever going to change? We have national and international institutions in place to mediate or curb such power, but these institutions do not seem to be up to the task and, if they do act, it is often too late.

1. see for instance: www.worldmapsonline.com/historicalmaps/kr-1725-africa.htm
also, for the Americas see: www.worldmapsonline.com/americas_fabric_giclee_mural_1719.htm
and Asia and the Middle East: www.worldmapsonline.com/historicalmaps/kr-1721-middleeast.htm