

**Title—Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview**

**Author—Jürgen Osterhammel**

**Year—1997**

Categories: Theory, Colonialism, Imperialism, Empire

Place: The World

Time: 1500-1960

Argument Synopsis:

Osterhammel's book aims to provide a specific definition of colonialism and to delineate a framework for the study of colonial history. Many works exist on the theoretical implications of imperialism, but this is less true of colonialism. Osterhammel argues that colonialism is the system of domination put in place to serve the interests of empire and is to be understood as the operational dimension of imperialism. He identifies seven broad categories of analysis of colonialism: conquest and resistance; the formation of colonial administration and the role of collaborators; economic policies and the impact of capitalist structures; the colonizer's social structures; the cultural encounter of colonizer and colonized; and the role of ideology in determining colonial governance. Osterhammel strives to set out a definition of colonization intended to be applicable across over 500 years of global colonialism. He argues for a more unified view of colonialism as a process that began with the first European expansions after the Middle Ages and continues today.

The historiography of colonization has two dominant approaches: seeing the colonizer as on a civilizing mission or seeing the colonizer as nothing but invaders to be resisted. Osterhammel maps out a new approach that bridges the gap between the apologetics of old colonial historians and the current writers who diminish the effect of colonization on the history of the non-Western world. He claims that colonialism, and by extension colony and colonization, embody processes of expansion, thus can be considered as constant features of human history. He provides a variety of classifications in the book, including six major forms of colonial expansion, six major epochs beginning in 1520, and three major types of colonies. He identifies three basic state systems within the realm of colonialism: the minority settlement regimes of the African or Caribbean type, the bureaucratic-patrimonial state of Spanish America, and the proconsular autocracies of British India and French Indochina for example.

The colonial state imposed territoriality and created political boundaries, many of which endure in the present day. Osterhammel notes the colonial state's role in the "creation" of Asian religions—Hinduism as a clearly defined world religion was alien in pre-colonial India. He defines colonialism as a relationship of domination between an indigenous majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The entire process of colonialism was gradual and grounded in 'local' circumstances, both imperial and native. He also highlights two central features of colonial capitalism. First, that it was created not by capital accumulated on the spot, but by foreign investment. Second, that the forms of work which colonial capitalism entailed were never quite comparable to free wage labor. His book provides a concise conceptual framework in which to place further consideration of aspects of the fundamental phenomenon of colonialism.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Colonialism is the system of domination put in place to serve the interests of empire and is to be understood as the operational dimension of imperialism
- Three major categories of colonies: exploitation, maritime enclaves, and settlement colonies
- Colonial reality was multi-faceted and often failed to conform to imperialist strategies