**The Evolution of the Contemporary Political Map**

**Objective:** After reading this article, and from class discussions, you should have a basic understanding of what produced the estimated 200 “sovereign" states that structure the contemporary world map. This article will briefly describe the development of the idea of a nation-state idea in Europe, and its diffusion to the rest of the world.

**The Birth of the Modern** **State** **System**  
A useful starting point is the sixteenth-to-seventeenth century’s political pattern in Western/Central Europe. The Peace of Westphalia (1648), which was a treaty that ended the Thirty Years’ War between France and England, held that the King of any realm could determine the religion of that realm. This gave birth to a notion of sovereignty based in law and a government system – instead of one individual person. This legal principle became the foundation on which all states were to relate to one another, and the strong sovereign arrangements of Western Europe ensured that authority/governance was understood to be all encompassing for all territories.

The sovereignty principle is significant because, for the first time, it provided the idea that territories should be divided into largely autonomous governmental units, instead separate units of land to be ruled by individuals. This meant that the exercise of power was no longer seen in human hierarchical terms, but instead was to be exercised at one, national scale - that of the state.

The other key ingredient to the future of the European state system was the doctrine of nationalism - which is the idea that each ethno-cultural community (nation) had the right to control its own affairs, and that the exercise of power ultimately rested with the members of that community. These nations were said to possess an immortal spirit that was more important than individuals. Furthermore, nationalists believe that all progress and creative energy comes from the national spirit and the nation can demand supreme loyalty of its members. The ideal form of government is where nations govern the territory they occupy - the nation-state.

The actual pattern of people in Europe forced intellectuals to argue that nations could develop in a variety of ways. Some were diverse people knit together in centralized states (the English, the French, and the Spanish), some were the product of nineteenth-century movements to unify diverse peoples based on some sense of cultural continuity (e.g., the Germans and the Italians), some were the product of early-twentieth-century movements to free a group from dominance by another self-defined nation (the Irish and the Norwegians), and some were the product of movements to achieve self-determination from empires (the Serbs, Bulgarians and Croatians). In the United States the concept of nationalism calls for the blending together of very diverse people into a new nation.

The nation-state ideal has become a pervasive notion in support of the modern state system, but students should understand the gap between the nation-state ideal and the multi-cultural reality that lies behind it. The vast majority of the countries of the world are not nation-states in the original meaning of that term. Today we learn about Russians fighting Chechens, Palestinians seeking their own state, Basque separatists demanding greater autonomy from Madrid, Tamils and Singhalese fighting one another in Sri Lanka, and many more.

**The Diffusion of the Modern** **State** **System** **through** **Colonialism and Imperialism**

There were two phases of large-scale colonialization. The first lasted from 1415-1800 and was dominated by trading companies. During this period, European colonialists focused mostly on the Americas and some ports in South Asia. The Russians directed their energy eastward into Siberia. The first wave was characterized by conquest, plunder, slavery, plantations, and annihilation of indigenous people. For example, the Aztecs declined from 13 to 2 million by 1600.

The second phase of colonization was the late 19th century to post WWII. During it, the colonialists focused on occupation and government lands in Africa, Asia and the South Pacific Islands. The second phase was less destructive of societies because and economic exploitation was preferred to military conquest and rule.

Why periods of expansion? Colonialism resulted because of events in the core. When the core is insatiable - there is an expansion of colonial governments. When the core is stable there is a contraction of colonial activity because control the world can occur without colonialism. This is viewed as a better alternative to colonialism because formal colonies are expensive.

The historical geographer Donald Meinig described three types of colonial landscapes. In the Latin American case, extensive colonial influences date back farther than in the rest of the other colonized areas. Spanish and Portuguese colonialism in the Americas is associated with the decimation of indigenous populations, but there was also considerable intermarriage with indigenous peoples giving rise to new races. The Spanish set up an administrative system in South America to facilitate the control of a vast area as well as extracting wealth from it. This became the basis for the modern pattern of states in Latin America. The current states emerged in the early nineteenth century when Spain's declining power coincided with the emergence of a political class started independence movements in Latin America and consequently became free of Spanish control.

In South and Southeast Asia, the European colonists did not have a demographic impact on local peoples, nor were they powerful enough to claim major land empires in the early centuries of the colonial era. Instead, they set up key coastal bases and ports, and they developed a highly elaborate trade network focused on those bases. In the late nineteenth century Europeans were finally able to control large areas in these regions for profit through industrialization and trade. For this reason, the ethno-cultural make up in Southeast Asia was not as disrupted because European colonists had a practice of bringing peoples from one colony in the area to help administer another colony in the area. European colonial bases were frequently ports at the mouths of major rivers so it was cheaper to use natives to work instead of bringing in European laborers.

Africa experienced a very different form of colonialism. European trading posts and some colonial ports were established along various parts of the African coast as early as the 16th century (during the 1st wave of colonization) but in last two decades of the nineteenth century (2nd wave of colonization), the Europeans participated in an unprecedented land grab on the part of several European powers. The geographer Donald Meinig called these new colonies the "nationalist empires" because they were established by European owners for nationalist goals. That is each power wanted as much land as it could get. The resulting pattern of political boundaries was unrelated to cultural patterns among the indigenous Africans. The African colonies were also the last to gain independence, compared to other former colonies - many as late as the 1960’s. The new states were based on arbitrary colonial boundaries and had little administrative/governmental infrastructure.

These three types of colonialism led to the creation of the contemporary political patterns in different parts of the world.