



Explaining The Success Of The 'Angloworld'

Publish Date:

May 2013

This article from the [May 2013 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by Melbourne based writer, Jeffry Babb.

The term 'Anglosphere' is often used as a convenient heuristic device to group peoples, economies and societies which are apparently linked only by the language they speak, English. James Belich, however, convincingly demonstrates that English-speaking societies have a multiplicity of linkages that go far beyond a mutually intelligible language.

Belich, a former New Zealand Rhodes Scholar and now Beit Professor of Commonwealth History at Oxford University, sets out to answer one key question: why did the Angloworld expand to dominate world trade and politics? At the time he begins his study, the late eighteenth century, the Anglos were in no better position to do so than the French or the Spanish, neither were the Chinese or the Russians, for that matter. The population of Mexico, for example, was greater than that of the newly independent United States. Yet in what Belich terms 'the long nineteenth century' the Anglos came to dominate the world.

The key factor was that the Angloworld became a mutually reinforcing economic, social and political system. The Anglos came to stay. When the English emigrated to the United States of America, they maintained linkages with their source society. This formed an active link that promoted their new home. The Anglos preferred to settle where they were the dominant group, reinforcing their new home with fresh capital, fresh ideas and new skills.

Other potentially dominant groups were sojourners rather than settlers. The French were of the opinion that they already lived in the best country on earth—why should they emigrate? Where the French were dominant, for example in Quebec, there were few settlers to reinforce the founding population. Quebec remained an intensely conservative society until the ‘Quiet Revolution’ of the 1960s. Other societies tended to produce sojourners rather than settlers. The Nanyang Chinese, as demonstrated in Singapore’s National Museum, initially had no intention of remaining in Southeast Asia. They frequently took local women as wives as Chinese women did not emigrate.

What set the Anglos apart was that women emigrated alongside men. Women, who in this era were frequently in a condition of semi-permanent pregnancy, were not only homemakers and mothers but also laboured on the small farms that formed the basis of the settler economy while their men were away. In the establishment phase of settler economies, men often worked off the farm as timber fallers, miners, road makers, canal diggers and in other labour intensive occupations, particularly after the harvest.

When the United States asserted its independence from Britain in 1776 it had, within a short time, the counter-intuitive effect of strengthening the economic links between the dominant Anglo powers. America, still a frontier society, had yet to break through the Appalachian Mountains that barred settlers from the rich Ohio Valley. When the United States began to industrialise in the 1820s, it was following in the footsteps of Great Britain, the world’s first industrial nation. The United States’ north east, the world’s second industrial power, industrialised using British capital and British technology. The next nation to industrialise on the British model, Belgium, did not do so for several more decades.

Britain was America’s main market for many years. The loss of American exports to Britain, as with cotton during the American Civil War, caused havoc in both economies. British capital not only helped build Virginia’s tobacco-based economy, it also promoted growth throughout America west of the Appalachians. British settlers, notably the Scotch Irish from Ulster, proved to be the equal of any American Indian in hardiness and ruthlessness as the frontiersmen breached the Appalachian barrier.

Belich has a rather neat heuristic device that allows comparisons between what he terms the British and American ‘Wests’. The American ‘West’ is self-explanatory. The British ‘Wests’ consists of those societies which mirror the settlerist characteristics of the American West, such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Some British Wests, such as South Africa and Argentina, never quite reached take off point.

The American and British Wests shared common characteristics. This was no accident, because



the American and British Wests were mutually reinforcing. London acted as a clearing house for exports of capital. Another key British export was people. Britain became overcrowded and was unable to feed itself. It took a century and a half from the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846 before Britain was able to achieve self sufficiency in food again. Ships carried timber from Canada and returned filled with emigrants. Wheat from the Canadian Prairies and the American Midwest was milled into flour and baked in London. London itself, with its seemingly insatiable appetite for top quality meat, including Australian beef and New Zealand 'British' lamb, was itself a mighty magnet for Angloworld trade.

The Angloworld was built around a circulation of people and goods. Take for example our own 'Marvellous Melbourne'.

Melbourne was a boom city; it attracted immigrants from all over the Angloworld. The population of Melbourne grew from virtually nothing in the 1850s to almost 500,000 in 1891, when Melbourne's bubble burst. Melbourne, at its peak, was bigger than Sydney, bigger than San Francisco and far bigger than Los Angeles. Melbourne took almost 20 years to recover from its bust in the 1890s, but although it might never have been as marvellous as it once was, Melbourne did recover. Many people simply moved on to other parts of the Angloworld.

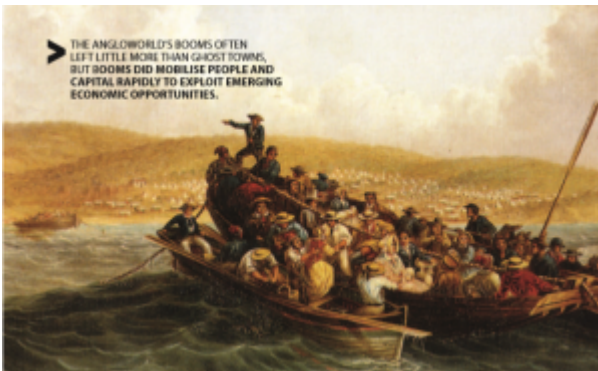
Melbourne was characteristic of Angloworld boom cities, and booms were a characteristic of the Angloworld, as were the accompanying busts. Cities such as Chicago regularly reinvented themselves on the backs of new industries and new markets. Chicago's early days were characterised by multiple conflagrations that consumed much of the city, so it could be said to have truly recreated itself.

Chicago had a rich hinterland and was the strategic transport node that connected the eastern and western United States. Thus its status as a boom city seems to be readily explicable. Los Angeles, on the other hand, was a boom in search of a purpose. Los Angeles had no natural harbour, no water and no industries apart from growth itself until fruit and vegetable growing took off in the Central Valley. The Bank of Italy (now the Bank of America) backed the first film producers and became handmaiden to the twentieth century's dominant popular art form, the motion picture. If Los Angeles had a defining characteristic, it was that it had the best boosters.

The Angloworld's booms often left little more than ghost towns, but booms did mobilise people and capital rapidly to exploit emerging economic opportunities. The aftermath of the boom was the economic rescue, where new industries emerged to make use of under-utilised resources following the boom. Belich argues, for example, that booms often lacked economic logic and that so-called 'export booms' were in fact no such thing, as in the early stages these booms produced substantial trade deficits.

The mobile population that provided the manpower in boom times could do two things—settle down, or move on. In construction, transport and mining, a male 'crew culture' emerged, characterised by high alcohol consumption, episodic violence, transience and bachelorhood. Once these men lost their physical strength, they were frequently regarded as expendable. Whereas an unmarried woman could often cobble together a living or was supported by her family, older

unmarried men often had little utility.



Thomas Baine's depiction of British settlers arriving at Algoa in 1853.

The favoured form of social and economic organisation in the Angloworld Wests was an independent yeomanry—that is, independent small and medium farms and business enterprises which allowed a family to support itself without the intervention of the government. Schemes such as 'closer settlement' meant that landed magnates had their holdings broken up, allowing yeoman farmers to cultivate the land more intensively. Where the magnates persisted and the farmers were tenants rather than owners, as in Argentina, the result was political and social instability.

Belich prefers the term 'Angloworld' to 'Anglosphere', which he says has connotations of triumphalism. The analysis is similar. His seminal idea—that there is far more to the Angloworld than a commonality of language—is comprehensively demonstrated. The Angloworld is a mutually reinforcing system for the exchange of people, capital and ideas. Where the primary values of the Angloworld are marginalised, as in Argentina and South Africa, the outcomes are less than desirable, a case of the exceptions proving the rule. The dual capitals of the American and British Wests, New York, and London, have maintained their supremacy for two centuries. They were the first modern megacities.

What of Australia? No amount of boosting the 'Asian Century' will alter the fact that Australia remains in origin and orientation a member of the Angloworld. The United States has been a melting pot for centuries, but retains its Angloworld orientation. Membership of the Angloworld constitutes a substantial part of Australia's appeal to new settlers, not least settlers from Asia.

The United States has been a melting pot for centuries. Britain has become a multiethnic society in recent decades, but does anyone seriously believe in times to come it will no longer be 'Anglo?' The Angloworld is more than a matter of language. 'La Francophonie', the French attempt to bind its former colonies to the French mainland, has nothing like the adhesion of the Angloworld.

What made the Angloworld the globe's most influential social, economic and political force for two centuries was not that the Anglos left home—other Europeans did that too—but they came to stay, and they brought with them a unique set of values. They were settlers, not sojourners.