



Stolen Minds: The Real Reason for the West's Prosperity

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"Behind every great fortune lies a great crime." - Honore de Balzac

It is 1848. The Scottish botanist Robert Fortune has transitioned from the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, Scotland, to the prestigious Horticultural Society of London. Fortune's fascinating memoir of his first trip to China's richly biodiverse and scenic Wu Yi highlands has got the ears of London's nobility, particularly now that China, an imperial power in the East, hoards tea seedlings and tea technology. The status-chasing British elite remain infatuated by tea as an upper class beverage since it was introduced to Victorian high society as a cultural fad by the Portuguese royalty Catherine of Braganza.

As Sara Rose would later recount in *How England Stole the World's Favourite Drink and Changed History*, Fortune was approached by a representative of the East India Trading Company to smuggle tea seedlings, Chinese tea experts and tea technology out of China into British-controlled India. The theft would become the most critical economic espionage of the 19th century and would effectively shift the global centre of economic power from the East to the West for the next 130 years. (China wouldn't recover until the late 1970s.)

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as the 13th century Islamic scholars Al-Tabari and Ibn al-Nadim would recount, intellectual property exports were fueled by what's now known as the Translation Movement of the late 800s AD. The project saw much of the Greek Hellenistic intellectual, economic and commercial capital translated into Arabic, a move that partly aided the rise of the Islamic Golden Age from the 12th to the 15th century. Done under the guise of integrating the large Greek-speaking populations into the expanding Islamic kingdoms, the translations helped chronicle the contributions of Greeks, Indians, and Persians to science, mathematics, trade, and philosophy.

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Beginning in the 600s AD, the Islamic Umayyad Empire swayed more towards militaristic conquest which, while broadening its borders, brought into its fold numerous disparate groups speaking different languages. The Abbasid Empire that followed after in the 800s benefited from the intellectual curiosity of the Buddhist-Iranian Royal Islamic family, the Barmakids, whose translation efforts rendered much of the ancient scholarly work into the Arabic language and nuances.

Soon enough the Arabic translations plus the resultant Islamic innovations made their way to Christian Europe via Sicily, Andalusia in the Mediterranean, Toledo in Spain and Venice in Italy. This Islamic conquest of Europe precipitated a Norman-Arab-Indo-Byzantium culture through which Eastern ideas seeped their way West via trade, wars and industrial espionage. This contradicts long-time Harvard professor and political scientist Samuel Huntington's claim in the [*Clash of Civilizations*](#) that Islam and the West have always been incompatible and fundamentally opposed to each other.

Venice, the glassmaking capital of the ancient world, grew its commercial stature on the back of the industrial skills found in those translated texts in the Byzantium Empire and the Orient. The Venetians, well aware that industrial espionage fuels the rise or fall of nations, in 1295 passed a Venetian law that banned foreigners from learning the skill and also forbade its most skilled craftsmen from traveling out of the city. They'd go as far as locking them up in the Venetian island of Murano from which we get the legend of Murano glassmaking that has lasted till date.

However, in 1612, a Florentine priest and chemist, Antonio Neri, published his seminal work, *L'artra Vetraria* (The Art of Glass) that revealed industrial glassmaking secrets and made them accessible to the wider public and foreigners. Over time, the Bohemian Kingdom in the westerly region of the Czech Republic stole the glassmaking technology and so did the French.

The Victorian aristocracy not only swindled industrial tea technology from China to India, it would also loot the Indian subcontinent through the Raj colonial rule. As recounted by former United Nations diplomat Shashi Tharoor in his work *Inglorious Empire*, under British colonial theft, India's share of global manufacturing fell from 27 per cent to 2 per cent.

Keep in mind that as British macroeconomist, the late Angus Maddison, had calculated, in the 1800s, China and India together accounted for 52 per cent of global trade. Colonial theft, industrial-scale looting and loss of trade secrets to Euro-American imperial powers brought these two giants to their knees.

How nations prosper

Conventional textbook wisdom dictates that the path of nations to prosperity is dependent on a

multitude of variables, key among them being democracy, managed bureaucracy, equitable taxes, property rights, the size of the (in)formal sectors, and the inclusivity of the economy.

Controversial British social historian Niall Ferguson credits what he calls the six killer apps of Western civilization - competition, science, a property-owning democracy, modern medicine, a consumer society, and the Protestant work ethic - as the engines of Euroamerican economic power.

Meanwhile, Coolidge lecturer and professor of economics emeritus David Landes credits Western values, primarily hard work, the advancement of scientific knowledge, and a passion for progress, as the keys to a nation's success. In his book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, he makes a treatise for the role of markets and governments, with Landes preferring a statecraft built to intervene only when necessary but one that mostly leaves the nation-state to the power of the markets for good and for ill.

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Christian historian Russell Kirk follows the path of divine discipline, his central claim being that culture itself descends from cult or religion. It's his belief in *Civilization Without a Religion* that metaphysics makes it possible to establish basic set of common values out of which emerges public trust that makes greater cooperation and progress possible. Hence out of metaphysics emerges physics from which cultures grow into civilizations. This, he believed, is what gave rise to Western civilization as we know it, traced mostly to the Protestant Reformation of the 1600s when Martin Luther rebelled against the Catholic Church.

Back at the British Empire, if they imagined themselves as unique in the long chain of global industrial theft, then history awaited them. In 1791, as America's 13 colonies emerged out of the American Revolution, Pennsylvanian economist Tench Coxe and Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton were convinced that the only way the young colony could grow was through the age-old route of empire-building industrial tech theft.

In 1787, the American agent Andrew Mitchell had been intercepted by British authorities as he was trying to smuggle new British models and drawings of the latest industrial machines and technology to the US. He fled to Denmark to escape capture. The mission had been funded by Coxe, Treasury Secretary Hamilton's friend, who'd also go on to encourage George Parkinson to steal the textile spinning machine from Britain. Massachusetts businessman Francis Cabot Lowell too pilfered the automated cloth-weaving designs and later established the massive American textile industrial town of Lowell, which is named after him.

From its inception, America encouraged immigrating foreigners, private citizens, state officers, and travelling traders to smuggle in industrial designs, drawings, and European innovation to aid in state-building. America pursued contradictory paths in which it incentivised industrial espionage and theft abroad while firming up intellectual property rights and protecting innovations at home.

Historian Doron Ben-Altar portrays America's Treasury Secretary Hamilton's ambition as an enabler in what he describes in *Trade Secrets: Intellectual Piracy and the Origins of American Industrial Power* as "unabashed, state-sanctioned flouting of British law". America at inception fits the model of a den of rogue economic hitmen and intellectual pirates.

The country's list of bootlegging and contraband capitalism, as portrayed in *In Smuggler Nation*:

How Illicit Trade Made America, is extensive, ranging from West Indies molasses and Dutch gunpowder in the 18th century to British industrial technologies and African slaves in the 19th century, to French condoms and Canadian booze in the early 20th century, to Mexican workers, Colombian cocaine, and Middle Eastern oil in the 21st century.

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The biggest industrial theft in history though was orchestrated by the Soviet Empire and the US Allied Forces against the Nazis. As World War II heated up and Nazis were in retreat, American and Soviet scientists, researchers and analysts teamed up to loot occupied Germany of military, scientific and technological designs. Trailing behind Allied combat troops, technical teams, such as the Technical Industrial Intelligence Branch (TIIB), and the Combined Intelligence Objectives Subcommittee (CIOS), began confiscating and extricating classified research documents and detaining German experts from German corporations like Hoescht, I. G. Farben, Volkswagen, Messerschmitt, Dornier, and hundreds others in the rural towns.

Visualisation by Juliet Atallah

C. Lester Walker's *Secrets by the Thousands* chronicles hundreds of instances where Allied researchers and forces stumbled upon Nazi technologies that were lightyears ahead of what Americans, Soviets, and the British had in their respective countries. This ranged from industrial dyes to V-2 bomb technologies, vaccines, infrared technology, and dairy production designs.

It didn't take long for research teams embedded among the Allied Forces to realise that they were encountering technology that they couldn't even operate let alone conceive. This gave birth to *Operation Paperclip* that saw upwards of 1600 Nazi scientists hurriedly scuttled out of the Nazi-occupied regions onto transatlantic flights heading West.

Annie Jacobsen's account, *In Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program That Brought Nazi Scientists to America*, proves that the fathers of America's space technology, Wernher von Braun and Kurt Debus, were senior and controversial Nazi scientists and so were physicists Georg Goubau and Friedwardt Winterberg.

The Soviets too, through *Operation Osoaviakhim*, repatriated more than 2,200 German specialists to work in the Soviet Union as the Red Army ransacked the other end of the Nazi Empire. The operation conducted under the leadership of Russia's KGB boss Ivan Alexandrovich Serov on 22 October 1946 targeted mostly military technology, a tragic tunnel vision that fueled their loss during their Cold War against the West.

The Hoover Fellow Norman M. Naimark, in *The Russians in Germany*, paints the Soviet industrial age dilemma, given that, unlike the Americans and the Allied forces, the Germans weren't too far from the Soviet border. The capture of the Nazi scientists therefore carried with it urgent anthropological and historical issues for which mythmaking and brainwashing were deemed necessary.

As Lester Walker notes, it's a disturbing realisation for modern humans that the most creative period in world history may have occurred under the Nazis between 1932 and 1945, and that it was

the murderous and racist Nazis' scientific research breakthroughs that gifted the modern world a significant majority of its current industrial and technological conveniences.

Espionage? Moi?

Still is it even a vice if the French haven't tried it? In a 2014 WikiLeaks cable Berry Smutny, the head of the German satellite company OHB Technology, called France the top offender when it comes to industrial espionage, terming them worse than China and Russia.

France has consistently been accused over the decades of going after military, space and aviation technology from every country it deems to have superior inventions in these fields. America's former Defense Secretary Robert Gates asserts that besides China, France is the second most tenacious and capable cybersecurity risk to America's defences.

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It's laughably obtuse, therefore, given the historical economic records, for Europe and America to consistently complain over what they dub China's massive industrial espionage. According to the US authorities, from 2011 more than 90 per cent of the State Department's cases alleging economic espionage involving a state pointed at China, and more than two-thirds of the Department's theft of trade secrets cases were directly linked to China.

For a country with at least 1.2 billion citizens, and 100 cities with at least 1 million people each, and at least 100 firms with a market capitalisation of over \$1 billion dollars, China seems unstoppable.

Between 1978 and 2017, China lifted roughly 600 million citizens out of poverty, averaging at 20 million each year, leading to an overall 94.4 percentage points reduction in poverty. By any measure, the economic progress that started with Deng Xiaoping in 1978 remains the greatest economic miracle in the history of mankind. The country's economic engines might keep pumping for another decade or two before it plateaus out. That's not how the West view it though. In China, they see a rogue state who steals ideas, and one who's refused to anchor her growth trajectory on Western patronage and powers, like Japan did in the 80s.

Trade is war

Further south, Africa's wealth, encumbered by global geopolitical and geo-economic contestations, has consistently been the site of plunder effected through tax havens and illicit financial flows. A significant chunk of this resource theft takes advantage of weak legislation, sleaze, civil wars, population displacement, and weak governance structures. The spread and pervasiveness of this economic carnage can be at best quantified through the over \$200 billion in mostly illicit outflows and less than \$160 billion inflows through loans and grants.

The Ugandan scholar Yash Tandon, who's an honorary Professor at Warwick and London Middlesex University, consistently warns African countries that trade is a battle and often a zero sum game often pegged on the scale and efficacy of industrial espionage. Africa, as a crucible of innovation over the last 3,000 years, hasn't properly calibrated its creative contribution to modern civilization and the resultant loss from corporate espionage.

In *Trade is War*, Tandon demonstrably shows the Bretton Woods institutions for what they really are: internationally tentacled Western leeches designed to loot African economies and resources. His valuable insider view traces the skewed and aptly misnamed free trade agreements as simply state-sanctioned industrial espionage where economic hitmanship are ratified through charters.

African state bureaucracies, with their inherent mediocrity, often deploy the services of the intellectually weak, the illiterate and the inarticulate and sometimes the naïve among its ranks to represent them in these high stakes intergovernmental forums. The disregard for the fact that it is these global economic institutions who pass regional laws, regulations, pacts and charters ends up favouring their industries, experts, and products over those of the global South.

Crucially, the cyber-espionage bugging of the African Union's headquarters in Addis Ababa, the dramatic break-in at South Africa's Pelindaba nuclear facility, and the KGB-cum-CIA double agent Yuri Loginov's targeting of the Central Bank of Kenya are pretty much the highest profiled and publicised industrial-scale espionage on the continent. Often planted moles, wiretapping, bugging, spy software and rogue employees or a litany of spy methods get deployed to pilfer sensitive corporate and economic data from African state agencies, their embassies abroad, the military, public contractors, national archives, repositories, and research institutes. Africa has not only failed to protect its industrial, commercial and economic secrets, it has for the most part failed to also deploy its own industrial espionage against far much more innovative states and companies across the globe.

That's why Tandon's critique constitutes the single biggest indictment of the African nation-state's lacklustre approach to global trade, the future of their states, trade secrets, and the economic welfare of their firms and citizenry. A significant cluster of African states and those of the global South seem not to have figured out that shrewd pacts, industrial theft and illicit financial flows may just be the paths that propelled the countries whose economic power Africans admire to their current First World status.

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