

Accepted Manuscript

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Roberto Bonfatti

PII: S0022-1996(17)30068-5
DOI: doi:[10.1016/j.jinteco.2017.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jinteco.2017.06.002)
Reference: INEC 3054

To appear in: *Journal of International Economics*

Received date: 23 February 2015
Revised date: 26 November 2016
Accepted date: 5 June 2017



Please cite this article as: Bonfatti, Roberto, The Sustainability of Empire in a Global Perspective: the Role of International Trade Patterns, *Journal of International Economics* (2017), doi:[10.1016/j.jinteco.2017.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jinteco.2017.06.002)

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The Sustainability of Empire in a Global Perspective: the Role of International Trade Patterns

Roberto Bonfatti*
University of Nottingham

November 26, 2016

Abstract

I construct a model in which a colony trades raw materials for manufactures with the mother country and the rest of the world, and can rebel at the cost of some trade disruption with the mother country. Decolonisation is more likely when the rest of the world is more abundant in manufactures, or scarcer in raw materials: this is because trade policy in the rest of the world is more favourable to a rebel colony, while trade policy within the empire is more restrictive. I use my results to explain the timing of the American Revolution, and the Latin American Revolutionary Wars. I discuss some important implications for the history of colonialism.

JEL Codes: D74, F1, N4

Keywords: Colonial trade, rise and fall of empires, economic legacy of colonialism.

1 Introduction

When France lost land-abundant Canada and Louisiana in the Seven Years' War (1763), her remaining North American empire became scarcer in food. As a consequence, French trade policy became more open to foreign producers of food, such as the colonial USA. A few years later, in 1776, a coalition of US colonies found that the time was right to rebel against Britain.

*An earlier version was circulated under the title: "Decolonisation: the Role of Changing World Factor Endowments". I thank the editor, Alan Taylor, and two anonymous referees for their useful comments. I am indebted to Tim Besley and Robin Burgess for their help and assistance. I also thank Toke Aidt, Oriana Bandiera, Robert Bates, Dave Donaldson, Maitreesh Ghatak, Giovanni Facchini, Giammario Impullitti, Guy Michaels, Gerard Padro-i-Miquel, Torsten Persson, Steve Redding and Fabrizio Zilibotti for useful corrections and comments, as well as seminar and conference participants at LSE, Oxford, Cambridge, Paris School of Economics, IAE Barcelona, WZB Berlin, IMT Lucca, University of Padua, Cattolica University, the University of Edinburgh, CESifo Dresden and Stockholm School of Economics. Research support from LSE, St John's College Oxford, and the University of Nottingham is gratefully acknowledged. All remaining errors are mine.

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