

The Historical and Ongoing Impacts of Colonialism in Ouro Preto

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The black people who arrived in the mountains of Brazil came from diverse places, such as Angola, Whydah on the coast of Guinea, Mozambique and the Gold Coast. “From the conquest of Brazil until abolition, it is estimated that around 10 million black people were brought from Africa” (Galeano, 1971, p. 52). This was intentional; people from different regions did not have a common language, which made any chance of rebellion difficult, since they would not be able to communicate to organize this supposed revolt. And these people were selected in an extremely perverse way, always aiming for physical strength to perform heavy tasks such as incessant mining for a long period of time.

Slaves ate, fed and slept in the place where they were exploited until their death, and the nucleus of this exploitation in Brazil was in Minas Gerais, in the city of Ouro Preto. It was common for these people to die within a maximum of 7 years, as the sweat from mining left them soaked while their feet cooled in the water or on the stone. This closed and froze their pores, making them vulnerable to diseases such as pneumonia, apoplexy, convulsions and several other dangerous illnesses.

The city's municipal secretary's website says that the name is due to the dark gold found in the region, but when a historical analysis is made of this city, it is possible to make the analogy that this gold is of black origin and of black slave origin. Despite being full of gold, it became a poor region; without infrastructure, education or training. The same scenario was repeated in the Northeast of Brazil with the exploitation of sugar cane, where slave labor was used in the numerous plantations, but the population that lived there was constantly on the margins of society. Beans were more expensive in Recife than in Rio de Janeiro, showing that even with all this exploitation and the process of dehumanization of a people forcibly brought to a new continent, Brazil was constantly sinking into the hole it dug itself.

While the enslaved people of Ouro Preto toiled in brutal conditions, their labor was not just the foundation of the city's wealth—it was the very engine that built and sustained it. Yet, for all the gold extracted, the region itself was left impoverished and its people were abandoned once the mines were depleted. The exploitation of Black labor did not end with death in the mines; rather, it became embedded in the very fabric of Brazilian society, ensuring that wealth remained concentrated in the hands of colonial elites while entire

communities were systematically excluded. Gold built a city, slavery sustained it, and nothing was left behind. The rise and fall of Ouro Preto directly reflects the core principles of dependency theory, which argues that global inequality is not accidental, but structurally maintained. During the gold boom, Ouro Preto generated immense wealth, but that wealth was extracted and exported to Portugal, leaving the region itself underdeveloped. Despite being one of the richest cities in the world at its peak, Ouro Preto was left with no sustainable infrastructure or long-term investment. This aligns with the idea that the development of core countries like Portugal came at the cost of underdeveloping peripheral regions like Brazil. Even after independence, Brazil remained economically dependent on exporting raw materials—such as minerals, sugar, and later coffee—while relying on the Global North for finished goods and capital. Ouro Preto serves as a clear example of how extraction-based economies may produce short-term wealth, but ultimately leave lasting social and economic voids.

These patterns also had a significant impact on Brazil's political landscape. The legacy of colonialism and dependency created institutions that prioritized foreign interests and elite classes, while excluding the majority of the population—especially Afro-Brazilian communities—from political and economic power. As a result, Brazil, like many other formerly colonized countries, saw waves of populist and socialist movements emerge in response to ongoing inequality and lack of sovereignty. Scholars like Andre Gunder Frank argued that escaping dependency would require rejecting capitalism altogether, while others like Fernando Henrique Cardoso believed reform within the system was possible. In either case, the political ideologies that gained traction in Brazil were deeply rooted in its colonial past. Ouro Preto, once a symbol of wealth, now stands as a historical reminder of how colonial extraction shaped not just the economy, but the very foundations of modern Brazil's political and social structure.

Ouro Preto, nestled in the mountains of Minas Gerais, stands today as a haunting monument to Brazil's colonial gold fever. Once the heart of a booming extraction economy, it rose "to city size by 1711... the quintessence of the gold civilization" (Galeano, 1971, p. 53). Yet the shine of gold was sustained by the brutality of slavery: Galeano recounts how "the slaves spent their strength and their days in the gold-washing installations... susceptible to many dangerous illnesses" (Galeano, 1971, p. 54). Despite the immense wealth ripped from the land, almost nothing remained: "no result... except churches and works of art... the per capita income did not exceed \$50 a year" (Galeano, 1971, p. 57). This paradox is embodied in Aleijadinho, the son of a slave and a Portuguese

artisan, whose baroque sculptures are revered while the violent system that produced him is often forgotten (Galeano, 1971, p. 58). Ouro Preto's ruins, then, are not just physical but symbolic—traces of a colonial model that left cultural brilliance amid systemic abandonment