

Was late Victorian Imperialism purely economic in character?

In 1870 Britain held only a few settlements in Africa, which were little more than trading stations along the path to India; neither Gladstone nor Disraeli envisaged further expansion however by 1890 Africa was firmly established into the British Empire under formal control. Why did Britain sit at the head of a vast African empire over which it had claimed it had no desire?

After 1870 the expansion of empire increased dramatically. Britain raced against the other European powers to acquire vast areas of land through formal annexation. Many historians including Cain and Hoppen agree with the theory of 'new imperialism' as opposed to Robinson and Gallagher's continuity theory of empire. They saw that 'suddenly and almost simultaneously between 1870 and 1900, the states of Europe began to extend their control over vast areas of the world' (Wright) this was viewed as an increasing move towards formal annexation over informal control. This new imperialism was accompanied by vast social changes in British society and politics.

As Britain had peaked industrially earlier than the rest of the world, by 1870 industrial growth was beginning to stabilize, this, coupled with the rapid industrialisation of other great powers was seen by people of the time as factors signifying a 'great depression' in the British economy and lead to concerns over the balance of power within Europe which had previously favoured Britain, a change in this balanced was looking increasingly likely to be tipped in support of these growing powers. Britain was afraid that her status as 'workshop of the world' was declining and that she could no longer demand the economic domination she had done and was falling into decline.

Politically, the enfranchisement of a middle class created an electorate of largely industrialists with more money and therefore a greater interest in the affect of external trade influencing their investments. As party politics reached its greatest height public opinion became progressively more important, and voters understood the relationship between the Empire and their finances.

Britain had favoured a policy of informal control over countries and an informal empire. Free trade imperialism had risen as a result of Britain's industrialization where Britain abandoned and persuaded others to abandon protectionist policies this encouraged economic dependency on Britain as the informal colonies could not develop beyond primary producers. 'This left Britain with economic and political hegemony as the chief centre of industrial wealth' (Cain) Britain's formal policy was of non-intervention in the aggressions of Europe in order to preserve this favourable balance of power they enjoyed prior to 1870, and to intervene only where significant threats to this power occurred, had been the current trend of foreign policy however, the world at wide was looking increasingly threatening to Britain. Other power were rapidly industrialising and bringing competition to the markets over which we had previously monopolised. Many Britons were aware of the external pressures on Britain with 'the loss of the Navy's maritime monopoly, the poor performance of British industry, the threat from foreign tariffs, and the manifold challenges to imperial security and overseas commerce.' (Eldridge) the ideas of free trade and low armament expenditure were challenged by foreign protectionist policies, Egyptian and

Irish Nationalism, and the Franco Russian fleets. The themes of Weltpolitik in Germany and the French expansionist ideas were clear in their aims at establishing for themselves and Empire as Britain had done, which demonstrates an economic and military threat to the balance of power Britain had enjoyed so much in Europe. Britain for the first time when considering formal control of a province, were aware of the very real problem of a third power. These changes in the world had created this era of 'New imperialism' and over the coming decades the world watched as Europe embarked on the scramble for Africa and Empires. The reasons for this are varied and overlapping.

The changing status of the world has to be largely attributed to the development of global capitalism. This development was a massive economic change and had great implications in the imperial age. Lenin concludes that the rise of Capitalism is the factor that had determined imperialism. In fact that imperialism, was merely a stage in Capitalism. He argued using Marxist ideology, that by the 1870s the rise of Capitalism had caused the scramble for colonies. Internally capitalism had given economic status to an industrialised middle class with interests in investments who attained the vote were now able to influence public opinion in order to develop and safeguard their financial interests. Declining prices spurred on the steady search for steady and cheap supply of raw materials. Externally, with turning away from free trade by Britain's rivals, competition from the new industrialized nations, the rise of capitalism in the wider world leads to competition for markets and trade. The informal colonies that we had previously mitigated control over, could no longer be informally controlled as competition from foreign markets was swaying them. New markets were sought whether real or potential and Hobson claims these territorial gains in Africa did benefit a small group of capitalists who then encouraged jingoistic sentiments to further expansion. However, it seems unlikely that such a small group of investors could advocate the vast territory consumed by the British Empire, especially since the chief direction of British goods, capital and settlers did not go to the tropical African area, in which they saw little market potential.

Robinson and Gallagher saw the breakdown of informal influence in Egypt, which had made it necessary for the British to assume control there in order to safeguard the Suez waterway and the routes to India and the Eastern Empire, as the reason for the further expansion into Africa. This control over Egypt angered France who were now excluded from Egypt in which they had previously shared financial control, and lead to violent reactions in other parts of Africa against Britain. Other powers were then drawn in and the 'stock market' of African properties began. In the process Britain were forced to acquire the whole of the Nile valley as a means of securing their position at Suez. Thus Robinson and Gallagher argue that the formal imperialism in Africa was a wholly strategic operation aimed solely at safeguarding already established British trade routes.

I believe there are a few problems with this overall too simple explanation of Britain's part in the 'scramble for Africa'. Firstly, that many still saw the Straights as the key to India and were far more afraid of Russian action in the Mediterranean than Africa, far from being a British concern Cain argues that the Suez only came to prominence in British discussions about Egypt just before intervention in 1882 where they only intervened to maintain an economic order that would suit Britain.

Furthermore the interest in West Africa had been apparent long before the British occupation of Egypt. In 1873 British extension into the Gold coast had been authorized. Cain declares that the commercial crisis of the 1870s was giving both France and Britain colonialists in West Africa the incentive to expand the boundaries of the existing coastal enclaves, this led to fear from France and Britain of each other's expansionist ideas which increased the idea for 'anticipatory annexation' (Hynes) on both sides.

A factor that I have not discussed here is the way in which the idea of power was changing. In the Mid-century when Britain enjoyed the monopoly of the world economy and the classical liberal ideology of Britain seemed to be exported throughout its trade routes, with no foreign competition worthy of attention Britain saw power in terms of economy and trade. The theory of liberalism confounded this idea, that wars were something of feudal times and in the new social age free trade would ensure global harmony as it creates an environment suitable to all. However with the industrialization of foreign powers and their increasing threat to Britain this idea of power began to change. Due to the arrogance and ignorance of the British, we have seen how technological advancement that developed within the century was not taken up in Britain; a good example is in the cotton trades. New machinery had been invented, and Japanese and US companies were taking them up, the British did not, largely because they did not see the possible threat of a foreign company and because the machines were initially expensive (despite the savings in the long run!) and so continued with older, slower and less competitive methods, and lost markets to foreign competitors. This extended to other areas in British society and is most notable in the army. As Britain began to see her navy pale in the shadow of the large land army's on the continent especially Germany, and realized that our lack of standing army and immediate raw materials dampened our ability to wage and sustain war. Economically Britain saw the threats from foreign competition, which had embarked on a policy of expansion, and the army and material and ability to wage war, which they possessed, became proportionate to the power they had or could attain, by expanding their empire they could achieve economic status of Britain. This change in the idea of power was shocking to the people of the time. We see Gladstone's first ministry attempt to establish a standard in the army through the Army reforms and though credited mostly as a building block in the creation of a meritocracy, Disraeli did not openly contest the reforms and the Lords rejected the bills over the abolition of purchase clause not the reform of the army due to the knowledge and fear of this idea of power. It gives rise to Eldridge's 'imperialism of fear'

Eldridge who saw this new imperialism as the 'imperialism of fear' develops this idea further. He saw Britain as ever more fearful of being eclipsed Navally, and economically, and became increasingly defensive less willing to take chances, more suspicious of foreign powers, this fear also led to a drop in tolerance for indigenous people's rights (as we see in Gladstone's decision in Egypt, as he completely lost support for the Egyptian nationalism, despite earlier promoting Italian and even Irish nationalism!) This, Eldridge argues makes Britain take pre-emptive imperial actions, even if they were aggressive especially as there was growing domestic pressure to do so. I think this idea can be clearly seen in the Fashoda crisis and the pressure that Salisbury faced by back-benchers to assert influence against

France, and more so in East central Africa against Germany and Portugal. This idea is accompanied with the theme of popular pressure from home.

As I have stated the middle class had recently acquired the vote, the lower classes too however had enough political sway through the movements of trade union and other popular politics groups to affect a decision in parliament and with the advent of mass education, popular press, and imperialist propaganda politics had to bend to popular opinion or bend popular opinion to it. The idea of enhancing Britain's imperial status was seized upon by Disraeli as the way to confirm Britain's position as an imperial power this theme of prestige was important, the retention of great power status was greatly significant to both the old upper class and was transferred to the Middle and working classes through propaganda and the encouragement of the outbreak of jingoism in 1877-8. Although I do not believe that the popular opinion was greatly significant as a factor which affected imperial policy, because we see how education, cheap press and propaganda were creating malleable minds, the great lengths at which politicians played the imperial card at election demonstrates how important it was to at least have the public opinion in favour. M.E. Chamberlain states 'Colonial outlets were necessary for economic stability at home and on economic stability rested social stability.' Population pressure was one of the oldest revolutionary forces in human history and in the nineteenth century it took on some particularly ominous forms. In Britain a high proportion of the population was now herded together in the new manufacturing towns in appalling living conditions in which the theories and threat of revolution could develop. 'To distract malcontents at home by spectacular successes is an ancient device of nervous governments.' (M.E. Chamberlain) Robson and Gallagher lay no emphasis on the importance of popular opinion and I think that although public opinion is largely discredited simply because it was malleable it is still an important note, and clearly weighted on the minds of the contemporary politicians.

Something which has been prominent from my reading but I have failed to mention so far is the 'man on the spot' theory as advocated by Platt and Galbriathian who advance the explanation of frontier movement, that turbulence on the imperial boundary, and poor communication systems, lead to the 'man on the spot' as seen in the case of Gordon and Carnarvon. I see little weight in this theory as an overall explanation of Britain's imperial expansionist policies as it is absurd to believe Gordon and Carnarvon were directly responsible for the expansion of Britain in Africa however, I feel it is important to note that although their actions and implications were not approved by their respective governments, it does not mean that they were not done so on grounds of principle or ideology, as neither of these two factors appears to have had the chance to play much of a prominent role in this field. The governments at the time were expanding into Africa long before Gordon and Carnarvon and so I feel that their impact was minimal.

I believe that invariably all Imperial objectives during this period principally share an economic base. Taking into consideration the strategic theory put forward by Robinson and Gallagher upon more careful consideration we see how even this theory withholds economic foundations, by selecting to defend existing empire they are primarily defending trade interests and trade routes and thus protecting the British economy. Due to The rise of foreign powers and the idea of 'imperialism of fear' put forward by Eldridge yet again we see the economic motives at work, as Britain was

afraid of becoming economically eclipsed. Even if we believe that popular opinion held great sway over policy we see how at home, the upper classes were interested in distracting the malcontent of the working classes, the working classes would attain jobs through the acquisition of new foreign markets, and the middle classes were interested in their investments, which lay in industry and trade determined this. The changing of the world into capitalism brought about the economic motives and desires of all industrial powers to acquire an empire with which to extend trade with.

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