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ORIGINS OF THE NEW BRITISH IMPERIALISM

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ORIGINS OF THE NEW BRITISH IMPERIALISM

by

Ihor Kamenetsky

Introduction

The years between 1783 and 1880 saw British interest in colonies decline. The loss of American colonies, the expenditures for administration and maintenance of an army, and also the new ideas of political and economic liberalism cooled the imperialistic spirit of English Nation.

The lowest point of British Imperialism was reached in the year 1870 during Gladstone's administration. In the following decade the Old Imperialism went through a modification and reformation only to start in the eighties with a new vigor under the name of the New Imperialism. There seem to be many political and economic factors which revived British Imperialism in the eighties. The extended industrialization of England, surplus capital, glutted markets, development of technology, economic policy of protection introduced by most states of the world, the rising of new powers, growing of Nationalism and racial ideas — all these factors contributed to the origin of the New British Imperialism.

These causes which are often bound together or which grow from each other will be subject of my reflections in the following essay.

BACKGROUND OF THE NEW IMPERIALISM

The economic and political Liberalism which originated in England, and held sway there throughout most of the nineteenth century, turned with time against the maintainance of colonies, an attitude which was promoted by the Manchester School and the Separatist Movement. The Liberal attitude was that the colonies were only a burden for an English taxpayer who had to waste his money keeping British troops and administration in far-removed colonies. On the other side, in the eyes of Liberals, the possession of colonies did not bring a real material advantage. Liberals did cling to the idea of Free Trade, and they thought that there would be no difference to English trade if the colonies became independent. Because trade

is regulated on the principle of buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest markets, they thought the whole world should be regarded as an economic unit.

Considering the colonial question from the political standpoint, liberals thought that the self-governing, English-speaking colonies were on the way to become independent and that independence was their natural and ultimate end. The opinion of Turgot that "Colonies are like fruits which cling to the tree till they ripen," was accepted as valid by most of the English Liberals. They thought that any means for keeping the Empire would be unsuccessful in the long run and contrary to the natural way of development and progress. According to the Liberals, every attempt to prevent the Colonies from separating would be illogical. This view was expressed by one of the greatest leaders of English Liberals, Gladstone, in the House of Common on April 26, 1870:

"If you look back to the history of the colonial connection between European powers and trans-Atlantic possessions you find that it is the nature of those possessions to grow, and so to grow as to alter essentially, in obedience to laws stronger than the will of man, the condition of their relation to the countries with which they were originally connected, until they arrive at this stage of their progress in which separation from the mother country inevitably take place."¹)

And further:

"There ought to be nothing to preclude the hope when the growth of a colonial possession is such as to make separation from the mother country a natural and beneficial result, that separation so far from being effected by violence and bloodshed might be the result of a peaceable and friendly transaction. Surely it is a great object to place, if possible, our colonial policy on such a footing, not for the purpose of bringing about a separation, but of providing a guarantee that, if such a separation should occur, it should be in a friendly way. That is the sense, the principle, and the secret of our policy."²)

An outstanding example of the pro-separatist policy of the Liberal Government we can see in the order of Gladstone's Administration for British troops to evacuate New Zealand, and leave the white English speaking colonists there to go their own way in dealing with Maori's trouble and other New Zealand affairs. Gladstone's

¹) **Hansard's Parliamentary Debates.** Third Series, Vol. C.C. 2nd Vol. of the Sess. London: Publ. by C. Buck, 1870. pp. 1900-1.

²) *Ibid.*

motivation for this step is revealed again in his Parliamentary speech in which he said among other things:

"With respect to colonial defense, though the pecuniary burden entailed was the chief evil we had to contend with, still I thought that the greatest evil done by that system was done to the colonies themselves. We did not teach our Colonies to rely upon themselves, but we taught them to rely that, come what would, they would be defended by a power thousands of miles away. It is impossible to establish enjoyment of the privileges of freedom a fair distribution of the burdens which they entailed. Unless men are taught to rely upon themselves they can never be truly worthy of the name of free men."³⁾

This step of the Liberal Government was regarded by Conservatives in England and even by many New Zealand colonists as an expulsion from the British Empire.

Such an extreme case of Separatist policy became a matter of debate in Parliament and in the papers and, without doubt, helped a lot to revive English public opinion's interest in colonial affairs. Books dealing with Imperialism followed shortly after, written by such authors as Dilke, Carlyle, Froude — books which helped to swing English public opinion from, first, indifference or hostility toward Imperialism to, second, a feeling for solidarity and unity with all English-speaking parts of the empire and, finally, to an aggressive Imperialism.

THE MOVING FORCES OF THE NEW IMPERIALISM

The second half of the nineteenth century is significant for the growth of Nationalism in the world. Some nations like America, Germany, and Italy succeeded in achieving their national consolidation or political union and rose to the rank of Great Powers. In some cases national consolidation ran parallel with rapid industrialization of these countries, and soon England was faced with the problem of serious foreign competition. Already in the year 1870 there rose in England some voices which pointed with fear to the changing status of the English economic position in the world. D. Grant states his fears as follows:

"That dream that England was to be the workshop of the world is already a dream of the past. The singularity of our position is gone."⁴⁾

³⁾ Ibid. pp. 1902-03.

⁴⁾ D. Grant. "Home politics or the growth of trade considered in relation to labour, pauperism and emigration." London, Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1870.

The following two decades made the English economic position much more annoying. The amount of English Foreign Trade diminished rapidly in comparison to other countries. So while in 1870 England's Foreign Trade still exceeded the amount of Foreign Trade of Germany, France, and Italy put together, in the year 1880 the trade of France and Germany combined far exceeded the amount of British Trade⁵). In the same period American trade alone almost reached a half of the amount of British Foreign Trade⁶). With the Industrialization of many countries came another factor unfavorable to British economic interests. A wave of Protectionism swept through the whole world. Russia raised tariffs in the years 1881-2, Bismarck's protective tariff was introduced in Germany in 1879, France imposed higher duties on imports in 1881, Italy in 1888, and America raised the McKinley Tariff in 1890 much above the level of tariffs adopted during the Civil War. The protectionism had also another disadvantageous result for the English economy. It struck at British investment policy which England successfully applied before in different European countries. This new situation in the World Economic policy coincided in England with a row of sporadic economic depressions by the end of the seventies and through the eighties. The Royal Commission which investigated the causes of depression in 1886 found the cause in foreign competition.

The economic depression seemed to have the following effects on the growth of the New Imperialism: First, it promoted the idea that selfgoverning parts of the English Empire should be united in a kind of "Zoll Verein" which was coupled with the idea of "fair trade" and preferential rates. This conception though originally backed only by private businessmen was supported then by the Government and became a political issue. Second, the English businessmen barred from the continent and from the U.S.A. by high tariffs, turned naturally to the backward areas where no tariff barriers existed and where outlets for manufactured goods and surplus capital could be found. Their interests in backward areas needed often the support of Government. Support was very often granted, and so economic imperialism was interlocked with political imperialism justifying the rule that "trade follows the flag."

The economic reasons cannot be regarded, however, as single and predominant factors for the revival of the imperialistic spirit in Eng-

⁵) M. G. Mulhal. *Dictionary of Statistics*. London, G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1870.

⁶) *Ibid.*, p. 128.

land. The bulk of territorial gains which England achieved in 1880—1910 were in the colonies in Africa inhabited usually by very primitive people. The trade with these colonies was very restricted and comprised only 3% of the whole amount of British foreign trade. Its economic significance was very limited and we may assume that in many cases the political reasons were dominant in English territorial extension in Africa in the era of New Imperialism.

THE POLITICAL CAUSES OF NEW IMPERIALISM

It is apparent that the English Government was originally not interested in greater territorial extension in Africa. Disraeli though known as one of the promoters of the New Imperialism rejected the support of the famous African explorer Stanley, stating that Britain was not interested in this area. However, when Stanley interested Belgian King Leopold in his undertaking in 1876, and when the "International Association for the Exploration and Civilization of Africa" was transformed into a political agency of the Belgian King and initiated the colonial spoiling of Africa by Belgium and other European Powers, England too participated in partitioning of the "Black Continent" mostly to counterbalance the increase of other states, being anxious about its effect on the "balance of power." A second factor that induced England to action was its intention to secure territories providing important naval and coal bases placed on the African coast and lying along the way to India. Along this way the colonies like Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, Tanganyika Territory, Kenya Colony, were acquired to check the German colonial extension in South Africa. The third factor, the old Naval supremacy problem was still very important for Great Britain. English statesmen realized that the increase of the overseas possessions by any state was always connected with building up the fleet and constituted a future challenge to British naval supremacy. (This really happened in case of Germany when Wilhelm II abandoned Bismarck's Continental policy and turned his interest to overseas trade points and colonial possessions.) This also stimulated the British "preventive policy" which was turned against the unchecked increase of colonial might of other nations.

A clear example of British "preventive policy" we may see in case of New Guinea which, by the end of 19 Century, was only partially in the possession of the Dutch with the largest part of the island unoccupied. Australia, which was afraid of getting an unfriendly neighbor, suggested that Britain occupy the vacant part of

the island. Britain delayed, however, and only when the Germans occupied the eastern part of the island did the English move to occupy the remaining western part.

The fourth factor which stimulated the interest in colonies was the "war atmosphere" which dominated Great Britain through the eighties and in the beginning of the nineties. It was caused by Bulgarian controversies, Anglo-French conflict in Africa, and Anglo-Russian tension in Punjab. It was urged that Britain must have in case of war the sources of food supply under its control. And the sources of supply could only be colonies because agriculture in England suffered its greatest decline in the second half of 19 Century (agricultural depression, 1878) and was clearly no longer sufficient to supply food for the rapidly increased population.

THE IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW IMPERIALISM

The economic importance of colonies and the sense of unity was very much increased by the development of technology. The steamship, the telegraph, railroad, and the development of the modern warfare made the exploitation of colonies much easier and less expensive, — the maintenance of administration became more secure, and communication much faster and immediate.

Invention of refrigerator ships, for example, enabled England to have plenty of Australian fresh meat at low prices. The invention of armored cruisers enabled England to enter the path of aggressive imperialism at insignificant expense and with great effect (e. g., one single cruiser was able to break the resistance of the State of Zanzibar to British will.).

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF THE NEW IMPERIALISM

The understanding of the New Imperialism would be incomplete if we omitted the irrational forces which to a great degree contributed to its development. They were: nationalism, humanitarianism, religious zeal, the new idea of racial superiority, and mission of civilization. These ideas preached by a series of English historians and outstanding authors starting from the seventies to the end of 19 Century, not only eliminated the purely materialistic approach of the Manchester School toward colonies with negation of their real value, but soon stimulated English public opinion to demand from the Government a more active and aggressive policy.

The English preachers for imperialism tried at first to stress the organic unity of the English speaking dominions with the mother country, and pointed out the bonds of blood, religion, free institutions, and common tradition of the Anglo-Saxon world. This conception was acceptable in England and in the dominions. More difficult was to explain why the peoples of quite different stock — Indians, Negroes, Arabs — should stay within the British Empire. Arguments were soon invented. The English people were told that it was a moral duty of civilized men to bring the “blessing” of civilization, progress, and true faith to poor backward peoples. The public opinion was “informed” how cruel were the tribal chieftains to their subjects, how savage were the rites of paganism, how superstitious and ignorant were the natives and how they prayed and expected the white man’s intervention. In this way the colonial subjugation was advertised as a “glorious crusade of civilization and humanity.”

So Dilke said in his work “Greater Britain” that British “should carry the blessing of civilization to barbarians thereby providing a nursery of warriors and statesmen without which the national character must suffer.”

Rosebery exposed the view that extension of the British Empire was a positive duty which the Nation owed to civilization.⁷⁾

Rudyard Kipling beautified the mission of the White Man in his poems the most significant of which is the following:

THE WHITE MAN’S BURDEN

“Take up the White Man’s Burden —
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives need:
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered fold and wild —
your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.”⁸⁾

So the White Man was “loaded up with moral obligations” toward humanity and his conception became popular not only with the English, but with every nation involved in colonial imperialism.

7) T. A. Hobson. *Imperialism*, New York: James Pott & Co., 1902, p. 169.

8) Rudyard Kipling’s *Verse*, Inclusive Edition 1885-1918, p. 371. Doubleday, Page & Co., Garden City 1922.

America's President McKinley justified the occupation of the Philippine Islands by solicitude for the little brown brother "for whom Christ also died." We may notice that even the backward Russia justified its conquests in Asia with a device of "higher ideals": an example of which is the following verse written for a change not by an admirer or profiteer of imperialism but by its victim:

"We're enlightened. So we're seeking
Others to enlighten.
To reveal the sun of justice
To the blinded children!
We will show all! Only let us
Take you in our power!
How to build and fill the prisons,
How to forge the fetters.
How to wear them, how to fashion
Narrow, useful lashes, —
We'll teach all! But give us only
Your own high blue mountains.
That is all — the rest we've taken,
All the land and the ocean."

(Taras Shevchenko: "*Caucasus*" 1848) ⁹⁾

The new theories of superior and inferior races which Herbert Spencer transferred from Darwin's biological thesis in society, became a pillar of the New Imperialism. In the case of the British Empire it was applied not only to stress the solidarity and unity of the Anglo-Saxon races throughout the world, but also to stress the idea that Anglo-Saxon as a superior race should dominate the world. These ideas are included in the works of the following outstanding Englishmen:

Dilke: Expresses already in 1868 in his book "Greater Britain" a belief in the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon people and forecasts a future "world dominion of our race."

Rosebery: "It is on the British race whether in Great Britain, or the United States, or the Colonies, or wherever it may be, that rests the highest hope of those who try to penetrate the dark future or who seek to raise and better the patient masses of mankind."¹⁰⁾

⁹⁾ Taras Shevchenko (The Poet of Ukraine). **Selected Poems**, Transl. by Clarence A. Manning. Jersey City: Ukrainian National Association, 1945, pp. 169, 170.

¹⁰⁾ The Marquess of Crewe, K. G. **Lord Rosebery**. London and New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1931. p. 149.

These ideas were successful in swaying public opinion which, especially in England, was of importance in determining Government policy. There is, however, little or no evidence that the colonial policy of the New Imperialism was ever really guided by humanitarian motives.

The Nationalism which accompanied the New British Imperialism was quite different from that preached by the old English Liberalism. English political Liberalism stressed the self-determination of Nations, and English Foreign Policy in the post-Vienna Congress Period gradually stimulated the liberation movement of the subjected peoples -- to the great dismay of Metternich and other reactionary politicians in Europe. English non-intervention policy in suppressing national uprising, aid to Greek rebellion, recognition of independent Belgium (after the revolution of 1830), working toward unity of Italy (Palmerstone) are examples of the inclination of English Liberal thought.

This thought was never so strong as to be applied successfully to the British Empire itself which at the very time was a mosaic of different peoples. However, there were some efforts in this direction as we can see from Gladstone's striving for Irish Home Rule, the idea of a right to independence for English-speaking dominions and unwillingness of most of the Liberal Governments to extend the colonial possessions. We may notice that most of the territorial extensions in India during Liberal Rule occurred in direct opposition to the will of the Cabinet. It was carried through the initiative of English governors and local officials. We may also see the unwillingness of Gladstone's Government to interfere in Egypto-Sudanian controversies despite pressure by English local officers. It is significant that even when General Gordon was besieged in Sudan in the city of Khartoum, Gladstone delayed sending troops, not being willing to intervene. Only following the massacre of Khartoum, which caused a strong public pressure for revenge in England, did Gladstone interfere actively in Egyptian affairs.

This peaceful and liberal nationalism was transformed in the second half of the 19 Century into a narrow, emotional and aggressive nationalism which stimulated not only the minds of English leading men and statesmen, but spread widely amidst the British people and became one of the driving forces of the New Imperialism.

The spread of nationalism in Britain is manifested in the enthusiastic popular participation on the declaration which made Queen Victoria Empress of India (1876), in the popular demonstrations on

the Victorian Golden Jubilee in 1887, which significantly enough was coupled with the first Colonial Conference.

We may notice also the rising of national feelings in popular worship of the promoters of the British Empire — Generals Kitchener and Gordon became popular heroes.

The Boer War may be regarded as the height of new English national feelings. This war which in the eyes of a true Old English Liberal would be regarded as an act of the aggression and subjugation of a weaker nation became for an average, contemporary Englishman a holy national cause. As never before in English colonial history, thousands of volunteers not only from the British islands, but also from remote English-speaking dominions hurried to join the English campaign against the Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republic. The defenders of Mafeking against the Boers were celebrated in England as the National heroes and their deed was recommended by the founder of English Scouting Lord Baden-Powell as an example for English youth.

If we sum up the driving forces of the New Imperialism we may wonder which of them was earliest or the main one. If we are inclined to stress the economic causes only, we must have before our eyes the fact that many imperialistic ideas were preached long before the economic depression occurred in England (example: Dilke's "Greater Britain," written in 1868). The second evidence against a purely economic interpretation of the New Imperialism is that newly acquired colonies played a very insignificant role in the English economy. We may better understand the origin of the New English Imperialism if we do not limit its factors to one but rather look for it in different origins and follow its development observing their interplay. So we may say that though there were expressed many imperialistic ideas in England before the economic depression appeared imminent, these ideas broadened, and became national when the interior and exterior causes favored their growth in England. When foreign competition became apparent as a cause of English economic depression, when the active nationalism of other world powers started to threaten the survival of the British Nation, the theoretical ideas of patriotism, unity, racial and cultural bonds, heroism became most acceptable for the people's psychology and spread with terrific speed. They soon became the sources of inspiration for aggressive policy and justification of higher politics by higher irrational ideals.

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