

The Imperialism Of Jackals: Economic Dynamics Driving Less Developed Powers In The 19th & 20th Centuries

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Lenin once referred to the colonial expansion of lesser powers as the 'imperialism of beggars.' (Albert Wirz, personal communication) In his classic pamphlet *Imperialism*, Lenin suggested that the jackals participated in the process because conflicts between the lions left a space for them. Writing specifically about Portugal, however, he put forward another argument, namely that the British were manipulating weak Portuguese leaders, to counter the schemes of powerful rivals (Lenin 1944: 174, 178)

This approach has the merit of calling attention to the colonial expansion of weaker states, but it is unsatisfactory as it stands. Even a country as small and poor as Portugal was by no means a mere puppet of Great Britain, whatever the limitations on its ability to act independently. (Clarence-Smith 1985) Lenin neglected the dynamics that were specific to such powers. Arguably, the imperialism of little powers was propelled on particular trajectories, and, by a ricochet effect, influenced the destinies of major players.

The jackals of imperialism are here defined differently from Lenin, who lumped together the expansion of all second-rate diplomatic states. However, there were minor imperialist countries that were economically advanced. Neutral little Belgium was a 'pygmy' in international relations, and yet it was one of the most precociously industrialised among the imperial powers. (Gann and Duignan 1979; Hentenrijk 1972) Much the same could be said of the Netherlands, even though the country temporarily fell seriously behind in the early nineteenth century. (Kuitenbrouwer 1991; Kossmann 1978)

The focus of this paper is rather on countries that were economically less developed, even if they were in the 'major league' diplomatically and militarily. France is the most difficult country to classify from this perspective, on the borderline as both a great power and a capitalist economy. (Marseille 1984) A much more obvious case was that of Russia, clearly among the big international players, but with an economy that lagged far behind. (Lieven 2000; Pierce 1960; Lunger 1953) Other diplomatically significant and expansionist Western states with problematic economies were Austria-Hungary and Italy (Good 1984; Miège 1968; Webster 1975; Sbacchi 1980). Even Spain could be added to this group. (Clarence-Smith 1991; Balfour 1997)

A clutch of Latin American countries should also be included in the category of weaker Western states engaging in secondary imperialism. Setting aside territorial expansion at the expense of states such as Paraguay, there were states that encroached ever more ruthlessly into the extensive lands of autonomous Amerindian polities, some of which continued to enjoy de facto independence at the end of the colonial period. (Hemming 1987; McCreery 1994) Even a country as feeble as Bolivia, subjected to much international bullying, could behave in a classically imperial manner, for example in its treatment of the Amerindian populations of Mojos. (Osborne 1955: 86-9; Chávez 1944; Fawcett 1953)

In a similar fashion, independent states of Asia and Africa were simultaneously imperialist aggressors and victims of 'informal imperialism.' Asian and African imperialism has been generally ignored, or quickly swept under the carpet when it has surfaced, even though it has left a poisoned chalice of bitterness and violence to our contemporary world. It is unfortunate that little has been written about these cases, especially on the economic motivations and results of expansion.

The Ottoman empire was an obvious case in point. Because of nineteenth century liberation movements amongst its Christian subjects, Ottoman domination over subject peoples has received much attention, although its economic dynamics have hardly been touched upon. (Deringil 1998; Quataert 2000; Brown 1996) Arab perceptions of Turks reflected this long experience of colonialism. (Haarman 1988; Kayali 1997) As one Arab author put it disparagingly, 'But who ignores that the Turks have long since wandered from the straight path of Islam to follow a tortuous trail which will eventually make them, if they are not careful, blind schismatics, unworthy of the religious and political preponderance that they have desired to exercise over the sons of Islam?' (Millant 1908: 203)

Other examples of African and Asian secondary imperialism have been even less researched, especially in their economic dimension. One could cite Saudi Arabia, put together at the point of the sword to include Shi'i and other resentful subjects. (Kostiner 1993) Persia, one of the most ancient empires on earth, lorded it over Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, Baluchi and other populations, even as it was itself disputed between Britain and Russia. (McLean 1979; Atabaki 1993; Polak 1865). The consolidation of a Pushtun empire of Afghanistan, buffeted by British attacks, lies at the root of the present political impasse in that area. (Noelle 1997; Vartan 1969) Africa witnessed the expansion of the Christian Amhara nobility to form modern Ethiopia, and land-grabbing and labour coercion by Afro-American settlers in Liberia. (Marcus 1994; Akpan 1975) Thailand refused to let go of its Malay sultanates, even though King Chulalongkorn candidly admitted in 1891 that 'we have no particular interest in the states.' (Sharom 1984: 102) As for Japan, it notoriously moved from underdog to aggressor. (Beasley 1987; Myers and Peattie 1984; Conroy 1960).

In this category, China was perhaps the most impressive and yet neglected case. The Qing dynasty suffered from the infamous 'unequal treaties,' while conquering truly stupendous swathes of Inner Asia,

peopled by non-Han groups. (Elleman 2001; Kim 2004) Indeed, the scale of Chinese 'internal colonialism' has been masked by the inclusion of numerous non-Han subjects in regular Chinese provinces, as with the proudly Tibetan inhabitants of 'western Sichuan'. Accounts of Chinese expeditions to subdue these Tibetans are strikingly reminiscent of contemporary Western reports on campaigns of 'colonial pacification.' (Adshead 1984)

Secondary imperialism even occurred when the expanding state was considered to be part of somebody else's empire, especially when colonial powers engaged in a significant degree of indirect rule. Buganda, in East Africa was a famous case of a polity that was formally integrated into the British empire, and yet cleverly manipulated its European 'masters' to enlarge its territory and powers to a remarkable degree. (Kiwanuka 1971; Low and Pratt 1960) The current bloody conflict in West Papua [Irian Jaya] goes back to the nineteenth century consolidation of the Moluccan sultanate of Tidor under Dutch protection. (Ufford 1856; Jacobsen 1896) These cases are set aside in this paper, even though their considerable intrinsic interest would warrant further comparative treatment.

The spotlight is instead turned onto formally independent minor metropolitan powers, notably those in Europe. Relatively little has been written in a general way since I first proposed that a general analysis of these cases would be fruitful. (Clarence-Smith 1987; Porter 1994) Detailed work has appeared on individual European minnows, but without setting them in a comparative context. As for the imperialism of 'Third World' independent states, political correctness has all too often acted as a barrier to the examination of their experiences.

Internal dynamics

A comparative approach indicates that imperialism almost invariably proved to be economically harmful to the economies of less developed powers. Areas annexed frequently had few resources, leading King Victor Emmanuel to make the caustic comment that Italy had been left with the 'bone on the chop.' The fiscal problem was pressing for less developed states, but this did not prevent them from persisting in loss-making colonial ventures, leading scholars to put forward wounded national pride as an explanation of this reluctance to cut one's losses.

However, one should also take into account the social structures of such countries. Less developed states were encumbered with the disproportionate power of classes that were not fully capitalist. Landed elites held the dominant position in some cases, as in Russia, Austria, Spain and parts of Latin America. While not averse to aspects of capitalism, notably in terms of marketing crops and livestock, their labour relations were partially, if at all, regulated by the market. Landlords feared the loss of labour to capitalist factories, as well as social and political challenges to their domination from bourgeois and proletarian elements in society. Elsewhere, a political service class was superimposed on a landowning peasantry, as in the Ottoman, Persian and Chinese examples. Within Europe, post-revolutionary France was perhaps the best example of this constellation. It could also be found regionally in Iberia, as in northern Portugal, Galicia and the Basque Country.

The significance of such class structures was that urban merchants found it difficult to penetrate fully into rural areas, whether seeking markets for manufactures and credit, or wanting sources of commodities and labour. Similarly, industries developed as import-substituting enterprises, under heavy protection from tariffs and similar mechanisms. Facing a small urban market and a sluggish rural one, and unable to compete on the world market, industrialists regularly suffered from over-production crises.

Colonial protection appeared to be a 'natural' solution, especially when there was already a long history of such a strategy. Mercantilism of various kinds had long brought profits to the forebears of merchants and manufacturers, sometimes on a considerable scale. Protectionist colonialism was thus a tried and tested option. While the economy as a whole may have suffered, the same was not true of the bank balances of particular interest groups. (Clarence-Smith 1985; Marseille 1984) Moreover, the costs of empire, both human and financial, fell sharply as the arms gap widened in the nineteenth century. (Headrick 1981) Those who managed to stay on the right side of this crucial divide thus found it relatively cheap to conquer others.

The winds of free trade blew everywhere by the mid-nineteenth century, but the first cautious measures of liberalisation were overtaken by the 'Great Depression' of 1873-96. To be sure, it has been argued that the severity of this episode has been greatly exaggerated. (Saul 1985) This may have been true of Britain, but the same cannot be said of other countries. The agrarian depression, due mainly to the influx of American and Russian grain, badly affected many of the 'jackals of imperialism,' even if a few were among those who profited from the new agrarian circuits. A headlong rush back into protectionism, at home and in the colonies, was therefore witnessed in many instances.

In the late nineteenth century, urban elites sought to resolve these crises through the extension of existing protection into new areas, including for the re-export of manufactures obtained by merchants from more advanced economies. This fuelled an imperialism driven by a relentless search for protected markets, contrasting with Lenin's model of pursuing outlets for capital. This does not mean that capital exports to the colonies were entirely absent in the case of less developed countries, but they were often on a small scale, and typically took the form of investment in shipping and short-term finance.

It has rarely been appreciated that certain agricultural interests also looked to the colonies for markets, even if the distinction between rural raw materials and simple manufactures was at times rather blurred. Mediterranean countries regularly sought to off-load surplus cheap wine and brandies on their empires. Similarly, the flour-mills of Castile played a leading role in seeking to retain the Cuban and Puerto Rican colonies prior to the disaster of 1898. (Maluquer 1974)

A much neglected further economic factor was that colonies saved on scarce foreign exchange, which became all the more important after the First World War, when the gold standard lay in ruins. Less developed countries were usually large importers of capital, and had to pay in hard currency for certain crucial raw materials, notably raw cotton. Balance of payment crises occurred regularly, especially when foreign capital took fright and left. The advantage of colonies was that they could be forced to accept payment in metropolitan paper currency. Under Salazar, the Portuguese empire became self-sufficient in raw cotton, even applying a sliding scale guarantee that it would pay 20% above world market prices for colonial raw cotton in 1937. (Clarence-Smith 1985: 150; Pitcher 1993) This decision neatly illustrates that foreign exchange was the key, and not the frequently alleged plunder of raw materials through 'unequal exchange.'

Foreign exchange was also earned through re-exports, another hoary old mercantilist strategy. Initially, this worked by forcing colonial raw materials to pass through the metropolis for re-export, as with African rubber and cocoa exported via Lisbon before 1914. This cumbersome and costly system was replaced after the First World War by the forcible substitution of a proportion of the hard currency earnings of colonial firms by metropolitan currency, through the more sophisticated mechanisms of exchange control. There was a further advantage, in that metropolitan currency effectively had to be spent on metropolitan goods, or at least on manufactures transiting through metropolitan ports.

A more difficult area for quantification concerns reserved employment in the colonies. Less developed states typically had a highly clientelistic system of jobs in the public sector, and it was useful to be able to extend this network further afield. This affected not only the bureaucracy, but also clerical and military employment, and even positions in national firms. 'Jobs for the boys' were thus a significant well-spring of empire.

The 'national pride' argument should not be thrown out altogether, but it should be placed more firmly in the social and political context of these countries. Not only were they not fully capitalist, but they were also frequently not fully democratic, and were plagued by much poverty. Severe social tensions abounded, and 'social imperialism' was perhaps even more invaluable than in advanced countries in deflecting such tensions into the 'imagined community' of imperial masters.

To be sure, the fundamental un-profitability of empire, and its marginality in metropolitan economies, could also be argued of a 'big player' such as Britain. (Davis and Huttenback 1986) This was even more striking in the case of Germany before 1918, with remarkably large colonial deficits, and few profitable private enterprises to show for it. (Schinzingher 1984) However, such countries could better afford conspicuous consumption on the margins of the world, turning imperialism into a bloody kind of outdoor tropical theatre for their own versions of 'social imperialism.'

Arguments have also been put forward for the role of 'landed interests' in the imperial expansion of more advanced countries, most recently and controversially for Britain. (Cain and Hopkins 1993; Webster 1997) The position of Prussian Junkers in Germany's political system before 1918 was another case in point. (Wehler 1985) However, countervailing classes were more developed in more advanced economies, and hence more effective in pushing for their own agendas. (Dumett 1999) Even Cain and Hopkins' model depends on landowners

being allied with financial groups, which were notoriously overdeveloped in the City of London.

Nevertheless, it may be that studying the jackals of imperialism would throw up useful questions concerning the imperial expansion of the lions. Joseph Schumpeter argued that imperialism was in essence contrary to the spirit of capitalism, being the product of pre-capitalist classes and their autocratic and militaristic values. (Schumpeter 1951) It is possible that the weaker powers displayed an exaggerated version of processes that were not unimportant in the stronger ones.

External consequences

A related suggestion of this paper is that intervention by less developed powers turned burgeoning colonial collaboration into confrontational partition, thereby sharpening the tensions between great powers. This process has been obscured by a neglect of the cooperative nature of many forms of imperialism, itself a consequence, at least in part, of the influence of Lenin's pamphlet.

The interests of capital, in a general sense, did not require any kind of conflictual partition, but rather the provision of public goods by anybody willing to pay the costs. Over time, trade became more complex, and capital investments grew in scale, partly to bring down the soaring real prices of raw materials in the mid-nineteenth century. There was thus a growing need for the physical security of persons and property, the smooth operation of contracts, basic social and physical infrastructures, and a tolerably productive labour force. To the extent that existing states could not provide these conditions, the call went out for 'civilised government.'

However, there was no cogent reason why the British owner of fixed capital assets, such as railways, mines and plantations, would necessarily call on London to provide such services. He would be quite

satisfied if another state, including a local one as in Japan, came up trumps. Thus, the British satisfied German investors in South African gold mines, while the Germans oversaw profitable British investments in South West Africa [Namibia] (Richardson and Helten 1984; Drechsler 1962)

There was undoubtedly some correlation between flag and investments, but it was often the reverse of the one postulated by Lenin, in that governments took over an area, and then tried to interest 'their' capitalists in investing there.

As a result, multilateral imperialism was a great deal more common than Lenin wanted his readers to believe. The Public Debt Administration in the Ottoman empire was a good example of such a tendency, despite all the rivalries that diplomatic historians have ferreted out of the archives. (Thobie 1977; Clay 2000) The maintenance of an 'open door' in China, despite calls for the apportionment of exclusive spheres of interest, is another example. (Lee 1989) Reinforcing this multilateralism was the fact that large companies were not necessarily the national monopolies of Lenin's theory, but included multinationals like the Anglo-Dutch Unilever and Shell corporations. (Wilson 1970; Howarth 1997)

Even when political partition could not be prevented, it was not necessarily accompanied by economic partition. Examples of free trade retained by international agreement were Morocco, the coast from Côte d'Ivoire to Nigeria in West Africa, and the large Congo Free Trade Zone stretching across Equatorial and Eastern Africa. (Stewart 1964: 50; Marseille 1984: 234; Beer 1968) The mandates given out by the League of Nations after the First World War had similar economic guarantees attached. (Beer 1968)

Had the advanced powers been alone in the field, sticking to a broadly free trading agenda, it is unlikely that the process of colonial expansion would have degenerated into the unseemly 'scramble' of the late nineteenth century. The economic villains of the piece were rather the bosses of backward cotton textile mills in the Vosges, Catalonia,

Minho, Lombardy and Russia's Vladimir province, to consider only the European cases. They allied with the owners of down-at-heel merchant fleets, and dubious bankers and speculators. The latter were often drawn from international entrepreneurial diasporas, to whom nationality meant very little emotionally, but could be exploited for economic ends.

If one then returns to the hoary old question of who sparked off the scramble for colonies, one should look at such factors as the North African ambitions of southern European powers, the Central African dreams of a 'new Brazil' entertained by the Portuguese, Balkan imbroglios pitting the Ottomans against Austria and Russia, and the clash of Russian and Chinese ambitions in Inner Asia's 'great game.' Only reluctantly were the lions of imperialism sucked into these rivalries, and overwhelmingly with a determination to preserve free trade from the protectionist embrace of jackals.

Conclusion

Imperialism was not the highest stage of capitalism, but rather a very ancient and persistent phenomenon in human affairs, even if it took on a new garb with the advent of capitalism. The uneven development of capitalism, which coincided with hardening nationalist sentiments, meant that the economic goals of weaker nation states were significantly different from those of stronger ones. The ambitions of less developed countries could not be entirely ignored by more developed ones, thus inflecting the process of imperialism in directions which might not otherwise have been foreseen.

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