

How 'new' was the 'new imperialism' of the period c. 1870-1914?

Benjamin Eskola

9 Dec 2014

The history of the British Empire in the long nineteenth century has traditionally been divided into three periods: the initial imperialist period of around 1780 until around 1830, the 'anti-imperialist' or 'free trade' period from around 1830 until around 1870, and the 'new imperialism' of 1870 onward, characterised in particular by the 'Scramble for Africa'. It is therefore necessary, in answering this question, to look not only at whether a qualitative shift in the nature of empire occurred around 1870 (and if so, what), but also at whether the intermediate period itself was distinct from the earlier phase of British imperialism. (In particular, looking at the work of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson¹ and subsequent scholarship.)

The first difference which could be found in the 'new imperialist' period is that of the rate of expansion; the 'orthodox' interpretation criticised by Gallagher and Robinson in "The imperialism of free trade" was that the rate of formal annexation had decreased or even reversed during the middle part of the century. They contend that, on the contrary, many significant territories were annexed in this period (Punjab, Natal, and Hong Kong, among others). Further, although the shift towards responsible government in settler colonies was claimed as evidence of imperial withdrawal, they draw attention to the fact that this shift continued into the 'new imperialist' period as a rebuttal. According to Gallagher and Robinson's model, these are both instances of a coherent British imperial policy to develop and protect British economic interests; the former, by exerting direct power over territory; the latter, by stepping back and allowing colonies greater control (and greater responsibility for their own costs) when imperial interests are

¹'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 6.1 (1953), 1-15 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2591017>>.

safe. In the case of South Africa, for example, they argue that though the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were nominally independent between the 1850s and 1870s, their dependence on Britain and British ports was sufficient to guarantee British hegemony in the region. Thus, the British government needed only to maintain that dependent relationship in order to maintain the status quo, by annexing the Natal and otherwise preventing independent Boer access to the sea.

“The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas, 1750-1914”² expands upon and criticises some of these claims. They argue that a significant feature of the late-nineteenth century was the increasing influence of finance capital. Thus, the increasing control over South Africa was not only for its strategic significance with regard to trade between Europe and India, but for the economic value of its gold deposits. British interests in the Boer republics were increasingly threatened by foreign competition and by Boer economic policies, leading by the end of the century to the Boer War to ensure British control.

“Gentlemanly capitalism and British expansion overseas”³ develops this position further. They are to an extent critical of “The imperialism of free trade”, disagreeing with its focus on industrialisation as an explanation of the driving force behind British imperialism. They argue that a “gentlemanly capitalist” class dominates the British economy, with its character shifting in the middle of the 19th century from the landed gentry to the financiers and investors centred in the City of London. In this interpretation, the English political class in the 18th century was “concerned less with world conquest than with entrenching domestic political order”, but after 1815 shifted its focus and “used the weapon of free trade to create new opportunities for finance and services abroad”. It is this shift and not the industrial revolution which they claim is the primary distinction between the earlier and later phases of imperialism.

However, they do not dispute the pertinent argument made by Gallagher and Robinson, that British interventionism did not decrease in the middle of the century then increase again towards the end. They give the example

²P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, ‘The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas, 1750–1914’, *Economic History Review*, 33.4 (1980), 463–90 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.1980.tb01171.x>>.

³P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, ‘Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas I: The Old Colonial System, 1688–1850’, *Economic History Review*, 39.4 (1986), 501–25 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2596481>>; P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, ‘Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas II: New Imperialism, 1850–1945’, *Economic History Review*, 40.1 (1987), 1–26 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2596293>>.

of Lord Palmerston, who as foreign secretary and supporter of free trade in the 1830s was determined to “export abroad the same self-regulating system which was transforming British society” and believed that “it is the business of government to open and secure the roads for the merchant”. Support of free trade was therefore not inherently in opposition to an interventionist policy; Palmerston’s tenure as foreign secretary is notable for, among other things, the first Opium War, as a result of which Britain annexed Hong Kong and gaining extraterritorial privileges in the five Treaty Ports in order to advance the cause of free trade.

They also point to the significance of “cultural imperialism” in the so-called anti-imperialist period. With reference to British economics relations with Latin America, they point out that a number of states in the region “deliberately created the political structures that helped to integrate them into the world economy by encouraging foreign investment and migration”.⁴ Gallagher and Robinson, too, recognise the effects of British influence in the region, quoting Viscount Canning as foreign secretary in 1824, shortly after the wave of revolutions against Spanish rule there: “Spanish America is free and if we do not mismanage our affairs sadly she is English”. Similarly in the Balkans and Middle East, British political influence was used to encourage favourable economic conditions for British trade, for example by applying diplomatic pressure to the Ottoman empire to enact policies favourable to free trade and thus favourable to British business. Similar policies were applied in Persia, Siam, and elsewhere, though Cain and Hopkins point to the Crimean war as an example of British “anxiety” about their influence in the region that spilled over into open warfare.

In “Imperialism and the Victorians”,⁵ Darwin examines both Gallagher and Robinson and Cain and Hopkins, among others, in examining the nature of British imperialism. He acknowledges criticisms of Cain and Hopkins’s dependency on African examples, and goes on to argue that the apparent rapid growth of British territory after 1880 is deceptive. Given the rate of expansion during the middle part of the century, “the colonial incorporation of tropical Africa was not so much remarkable as curiously retarded”.

In this view, the distinctive feature of the later period of imperialism is not expansion per se but the increased dependence on formal rather than in-

⁴Cain and Hopkins.

⁵‘Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion’, *English Historical Review*, 112.447 (1997), 614–42 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cxii.447.614>>.

formal modes of domination. Darwin argues that this is best explained as a defensive measure, either against a 'local crisis' or (particularly in the case of Africa, and influenced by the decisions of the Congress of Berlin) to prevent other European powers from usurping Britain's position of predominance. Thus, the difference is not due to a shift in the imperial mindset, favouring formal over informal empire, but because it would benefit British interests to do so—just as had been the case earlier in the century. He gives the example of Uganda, annexed by Britain not, as had previously been suggested, due to a grand strategic vision laid out by Whitehall, but due to pressure from the East Africa Company, whose business depended on dominance in the region and upon whom British control in East Africa depended.

Overall, the extent to which late-nineteenth-century imperialism was 'new' is questionable. Although significant changes to the economic and political system of Britain and its empire took place during that time, they did little to alter the basic nature of imperialism; throughout the century, the British government acted to strengthen British economic interests. While the predominant mode of action varied over time and from place to place, 'new' imperialism was not new in its goals or mindset; geopolitical circumstances led to a different set of options at the end of the century than it had during the middle. 'New' imperialism was not new—only different.

References

- Cain, P. J., and A. G. Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas I: The Old Colonial System, 1688–1850', *Economic History Review*, 39.4 (1986), 501–25 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2596481>>
- — —, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas II: New Imperialism, 1850–1945', *Economic History Review*, 40.1 (1987), 1–26 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2596293>>
- — —, 'The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas, 1750–1914', *Economic History Review*, 33.4 (1980), 463–90 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.1980.tb01171.x>>
- Darwin, John, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion', *English Historical Review*, 112.447 (1997), 614–42 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cxii.447.614>>
- — —, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (Penguin, 2013)
- Gallagher, John, and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 6.1 (1953), 1–15 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2591017>>

Levine, Philippa, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (Pearson Longman, 2007)

Porter, Bernard, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850-1983*, 2nd edn (Longman, 1984)