

## IMPERIALISM IN AFRICA

**Augustus Fisher**

Department of Political Science, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State,  
Nigeria

Email: [augustus.fisher@fuoye.edu.ng](mailto:augustus.fisher@fuoye.edu.ng)

### ABSTRACT

*Since the phenomenon of Imperialism is so important for Africa's political and economic thought, it is important to begin by understanding it. What is Imperialism? Imperialism cannot be defined in any generally acceptable way. It means different things to different people. Let us note some of these differences as they appear. Because the fruits of imperialism- the subordinate areas variously called possessions, colonies, protectorates, semi-protectorates, and dependent states- have long been regarded as valuable to the controlling state, they have been eagerly sought. Finally, we may ask, is it inherent in the very nature of underdevelopment that makes development such an impossible task? Among the many prescriptions, after "flag independence," that have been offered- e.g. cultural, social, psychological, even economic-none has produced any encouraging results. In fact nearly all of them have had negative result, and made bad situations worse. Are we to continue with the same experiments at the expense of the people, who, have borne the whole burden of these experiments throughout the last decades this is the question to which all the developing countries, especially those in Africa, must address themselves*

**KEYWORDS** *Imperialism; Africa; economic thought*



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### INTRODUCTION

Since the phenomenon of Imperialism is so important for Africa's political and economic thought, it is important to begin by understanding it. What is Imperialism? Imperialism cannot be defined in any generally acceptable way. It means different things to different people. Let us note some of these differences as they appear (Acemoglu et al., 2013).

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Imperialism is a policy which aims at creating, organizing, and maintaining an empire; that is, a state of vast size composed of various more or less distinct national units and subject to a single centralised will (Bonn, 1937).

Imperialism is employment of the engines of government and diplomacy to acquire territories, protectorates, and/or spheres of influence occupied usually by other races or peoples, and to promote industrial, trade, and investment opportunities (Beard, 1946).

Imperialism means domination of non-European native races by totally dissimilar European nations (Moon, 1926)

It will be seen that Julius imposed a quantitative measurement and presumably ruled out the possibility of a “small imperialism.” Beard excluded all except economic motivations, and he made direct government action an inseparable part of imperialism. Moon injected the test of racial difference (Barraclough & Kellett, 1967).

It would be futile to attempt to reconcile these definitions and a host of others- but it may be possible to make a number of helpful observations. The first and most obvious one is that “imperialism” is a highly subjective word- that writers define pretty much as they please (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012). Second, imperialism has become more of an epithet than anything else: the Russians use it to stigmatise the policies of the Western states, and the Communist powers use it to blacken Soviet policies, and the “uncommitted world” use it to condemn the policies of both the Communist and non-Communist worlds (Palmer & Perkins, 1969). As Raymond Buell remarked many years ago, “every unjustifiable demand made by one government upon another- every aggressive war- is called imperialism (Buell, 1929). Imperialism is a word which indeed covers many sins

Third, it seems that if there is any consensus in common usage certain occasional qualifications ought to be disregarded. Thus what commonly passes for imperialism seems to warrant these assertions: 1. It may have powerful non-economic motivations- it may, as a matter of fact, be without expectation of economic gain; 2. It may pertain to a very limited operation- a vast empire need not be contemplated at all; 3. It need not involve a difference of race- they may very well be imperialism within a single race; and 4. It may be planned or unplanned (Buell, 1933).

The most significant thing about imperialism and colonialism is not that they cannot be precisely defined or that they cannot always be distinguished from each other; it is that both terms refer to a superior-inferior relationship, and that hundreds of millions of people, particularly in Africa and Asia, have resolved to abandon their historic role as inferiors and to assert their equality with the people of the former colonial powers. In current practice the two terms are used almost interchangeably (Palmer & Perkins, 1969)

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

Because the fruits of imperialism- the subordinate areas variously called possessions, colonies, protectorates, semi-protectorates, and dependent states- have long been regarded as valuable to the controlling state, they have been eagerly sought. To some extent they have been the badge of status in international society.

Consequently, imperialistic rivalries have been a fertile source of interstate conflict, they have figured importantly in the international economy, they have often been an expression of belligerent nationalism, and they have been a major or a contributing cause of many of the great wars of the past three centuries (Palmer & Perkins, 1969).

The motives and techniques of modern imperialism were enormously varied and complex. The leading motives appear to have the following:

**Economic Gain:** this includes conquest for the sake of loot, the quest for competition-free markets and services of raw materials, the search for virgin fields of investment for the capitalists of imperial powers, and the urge to secure certain strategic raw materials. At times imperialism may have provided goods that could not be obtained otherwise; at other times it merely made it possible to get them at a lower price or with less likelihood of interruption by war.

**National Prestige:** many defenders of imperialism have believed that a state must achieve its “manifest destiny” or its “place in the sun.” generations of Englishmen gloried in the boast that “the sun never sets on the British Empire.” Benito Mussolini loved to move his hand over the map of those expanses of African desert and hill land that he had brought under the Italian flag. His chest expanded with his dominions. Indiscriminate Americans applauded the acquisition of territory that at the turn of the century made their country a world power. More recently we have come to the sober realisation that land for flag-flying may mean responsibility and expense rather than grandeur, but an analysis of imperialism shows that the desire for land and still more land has often been a product of aggressive nationalism.

**The White Man’s Burden:** in the past, at least, many members of advanced Western societies believed that their state had a moral obligation to carry the blessings of their own religion and civilisation to “backward” peoples. In their view, the white man had a duty to uplift his less fortunate brothers, usually in the yellow man’s Asia or in the black man’s Africa. Many of these people were wholly sincere, as is proved by the countless missionaries, soldiers, and administrators who braved the perils of the strange and unknown.

Few will question the sincerity of Rudyard Kipling, the poet of British imperialism, or perhaps of President William McKinley, who announced that in answer to his prayer for guidance God told him “to take them all (the Philippine Islands), and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and christianise them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellowmen for whom Christ also died.” Joseph Chamberlain, next to Disraeli perhaps Britain’s leading exponent of imperialism, also declared in 1893 that “it is our duty to take our share in the work of civilisation in Africa” (Palmer & Perkins, 1969)

**National Defense:** Imperialism may serve national defense in a number of ways; by providing areas and bases for the defense of the state or its lines of communication, by providing much-needed markets and sources of essential raw materials, and by providing populations from which troops and laborers may be drawn. The acquisition and retention of sources of raw materials bring economic motivation and military motivation very much together. One has only to note the importance that some states attached to their colonial sources of oil, rubber, tin, and other raw materials to be convinced that certain products play an important role in imperialism. Colonies may also be valuable as reservoirs of manpower. During WW1 France drew nearly Five Hundred Thousand troops and more than Two

Hundred Thousand laborers from her colonies, while England drew nearly Four Hundred Thousand troops from India. Because of the entirely different character of WW2, colonial troops were used mostly to defend their homelands, when used at all. Nevertheless, casualties among British colonials exceeded Two Hundred Thousand.

The Marxist-Leninist View: The Communists have their own interpretations of imperialism. They apply the term to a phase in the expansion of capitalism, but, of course, not to their own expansionism. There is thus a sharp distinction between Leninist imperialism, which is a Communist theory to explain the inherent and progressive iniquity of capitalism, and Soviet imperialism, which is a term applied by anti-Communists to the pattern of subversion and subjugation carried on by the Soviet Union.

The Leninist theory of imperialism rests upon the assumption that all political action springs from economic motives. Consequently, when capitalistic societies find that they have reached a point where the production of goods is so great that domestic markets are no longer adequate, they bring political forces into play in order to achieve the subordination of outside areas so that these may be held as controlled markets for surplus products and surplus investment capital. Therefore capitalism is itself the cause of imperialism.

While some of the Marxists believed that capitalistic states turned to imperialism more or less as a matter of choice, Lenin held that capitalism led inevitably to imperialism. "If it were necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism he wrote, "we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism."

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Imperialism in Africa**

In the centuries before colonial rule, Europe increased its economic capacity by leaps and bounds, while Africa appeared to have been almost static, Africa in the late Nineteenth century could still be described as part communal and part feudal, although Western Europe had moved completely from feudalism to capitalism.

The European economy was producing far more goods by making use of their own resources and labor. There were many qualitative changes in the European economy which accompanied and made possible the increase in the quantity of goods. For example, machines and factories rather than land provided the main source of wealth; and labor had long since ceased to be organised on a restricted family basis.

Imperialism is a necessary outcome of capitalism (Ake, 1981); (Rodney & Reipurth, 2008). the colonisation of Africa occurred mainly in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. There is a considerable disagreement among historians and social scientists about the causes of the colonisation of Africa and other lands in this period. It would be crude to reduce colonialism to a single motive because several factors contributed to it, but economic factors played the central role.

To understand the colonising imperialism of the late-nineteenth century, it is useful to begin by noting the relation of the industrial revolution to international trade as Ake rightly noted (Ake, 1981). Why did the industrial revolution occur in

Britain? Why did it happen at the end of the eighteenth century and not later or even before? The answer lies in the changing character of the relation of Western Europe, and Britain in particular, to the wider world economy. The significant change was the growing scope and greater intensity of commerce. The powerful, growing and accelerating current of overseas trade which swept the infant industries of Europe with it- which, in fact, sometimes actually created them- was hardly conceivable without this change.

It rested on three things: in Europe, the rise of a market for overseas products for everyday use whose market could be expanded as they became available in larger quantities and more cheaply; and overseas the creation of economic systems for producing such goods; and the conquest of colonies designed to serve the economic advantage of their European owners.

Phyllis Deane's *The first Industrial Revolution* brings out more clearly the relations between the industrial revolution and international trade. Deane discusses several ways in which foreign trade helped to make the industrial revolution possible. It greatly enhanced the demand for manufactured goods and so encouraged expansion of production and specialisation. Foreign trade made the requisite raw materials available, at low prices. Trade enhances the purchasing power of foreign and less economically developed trading partners of Britain to the benefit of British industry. Trade generated the economic surplus which helped to finance the industrial revolution. The institutional base of the industrial revolution was in part created under the stimulus of foreign trade. The system of orderly marketing, insurance, quality-control and standardisation of product which grows up out of the needs of foreign trade were important aids to improving productivity at home. Finally, foreign trade was a major cause of the growth of large towns such as Liverpool Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham. The growth of large towns expressed as well as encouraged the shift of the balance of the economy from an agricultural base to an industrial base, and it stimulated the massive investment in transportation, a major aid to industrial expansion.

This relationship between industrial revolution and colonialism sheds some light on what happened in the period 1875-1914 in which a new and virulent wave of colonialism engulfed Africa. The vigor and fury of the new wave of imperialism was remarkable. This new vigor in the pursuit of colonies is reflected in the fact that the rate of new territorial acquisitions of the new imperialism was almost three times that of the earlier period. Thus, the increase in new territories claimed in the first seventy-five years of the nineteenth century averaged about 83,000 square miles – a year (Ake). As against this, the colonial powers added an average of about 240,000 square miles a year between the late 1870s and WW1 (1914-1918). Hence, in 1914 as a consequence of this expansion and conquest on top of that of preceding centuries the colonial powers, their colonies, and their former colonies, extended over approximately 85% of the earth's surface (Magdoff, 2007).

This upsurge of colonising imperialism was fuelled by competition among the European powers for colonies; the competition was fuelled by a heightened consciousness of the economic advantages of colonies, and the declining competitive superiority of Britain relative to other European countries.

The European countries which entered the industrial revolution after Britain were anxious to reduce the negative effect of the competitive superiority of Britain on their economies. They limited the influx of British goods and tried to nurture their infant industries behind protective tariff barriers. In the face of this protectionism, Britain doggedly propagated the idea of laissez-faire, but to no avail; discrimination against British goods by America, France, Germany, Russia and Austro-Hungary increased, and Britain's export market contracted. Economic depression ensued. Against such threats Britain became very anxious to promote free trade, to find new markets and new outlets for investment, but most importantly she became very anxious to defend her empire and the commercial privileges she enjoyed by her connection with them. At the same time Britain's competitors were also in an aggressive and expansionist mood. As Hatch points out, they were convinced that British commercial and industrial power was a consequence of the existence of a British Empire.

Thus Germany jumped into the race for colonies. Bismarck, who had rejected the ideas of colonies, reversed policy, arguing that colonies were necessary for winning new markets for German industries, the expansion of trade and a new field for German activity, civilisation and capital. In 1867 Lothar Bucher, who was a colleague of Bismarck, had argued that 'colonies are the best means of developing manufactured export and import trade, and finally a respectable navy'. By 1880s this was clearly an idea whose time had come. In France, the mood was the same, where propagandists such as Jules Ferry and Leroy-Beaulien supported by commercial interest group argued the necessity of colonies for the development of French industry and French power. Italy too caught the expansionist fever and proceeded to seize Ethiopia. Belgium jumped into the fray too, and soon claimed the Congo.

When propaganda gave way for action, Africa found itself the focal point for the action; the scramble for Africa began. In 1876 King Leopold II of Belgium formed his African International Association, to found commercial and scientific stations across Africa between Zanzibar and the Atlantic, and soon annexed the Congo basin, designating it the Congo Free State. In 1882 British took Egypt. The French, infuriated by this, consolidated and expanded their holdings in West Africa. Between 1883 and 1885 Germany took Cameroons, Togoland and South West Africa, fearful of the consequences of the colonial gains of Germany and France. Britain moved to consolidate her hold on Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and the Gold Coast and turned to Eastern, Southern and Central Africa, where she soon established her rule over Bechuanaland, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Zanzibar, Kenya and Uganda. Within a few years after King Leopold had triggered off the scramble for Africa in 1876, Africa was divided among the European powers and colonised.

#### Effect of imperialism

Being colonised has a devastating effect on a people and culture. Foreigners overrun a territory with force and take it over. They install their own government, staffed by their own nationals. The inhabitants are forced to speak the language of the colonisers, to adopt their cultural practices, and to be educated at schools run under their guidance. The inhabitants are told that they are racially inferior to the

foreigners. The major impact of colonialism is that it brought about the underdevelopment of African territories in many different ways.

It is usually argued in favor of colonisation that the development it brought outweighs its negative effects on Africa. Following the capitalist rationality of minimum input for maximum output, they invested only in what they had to, and where they had to. Not surprisingly the places in which colonialism fostered some development as rightly noted by Ake were in places which were convenient collecting centers for commodities, such as Kano; places from where the commodities could be shipped abroad, such as Lagos, Mombasa, and Dar es Salaam; place where the climate was to the taste of Europeans and which could be used as administrative headquarters, such as Nairobi (Ake, 1981). These centers gradually assumed a character quite different from that of the surrounding country.

The argument in favor of colonial education reveals, when subjected to critical analysis, its hollowness and emptiness. The colonial education was not rooted in African culture and therefore could not foster any meaningful development within the African environment because it had no organic linkage (Atakpa et al., 2012) Furthermore, colonial education was essentially literary; it had no technological base and therefore antithetical to real or industrial development. Education in the colonial society is such that it serves the colonialist. In a regime of slavery, education was but one institution for forming slaves. Therefore the supposed benefits of colonialism are referred to as the unintended benefits of colonialism by Rodney (Rodney & Reipurth, 2008).

The poor technological base of most of the present day African states, which has been responsible for their underdevelopment stems from their poor foundation of education laid by the colonialists. Colonial education essentially aimed at training clerks, interpreters, produce inspectors, artisans, etc., which would help in the exploitation of the Africa's rich resources. Colonial education did not aim at industrialisation of Africa territories or at stimulating technological development within the African environment. Colonial education brought about distortion and disarticulation in African indigenous pattern of education which was rooted in African technology. Before colonial education was imposed, Africans were good technologists, advancing at their own rates with the resources within their environment. For example, Africans were good sculptors, carvers, cloth weavers, miners, blacksmiths, etc.

Another major effect was the disarticulation of the African economy. The colonial economy was characterised by disarticulation or incoherence. In the area of transportation, it would appear that the building of railways was dictated by the collection of export commodities. In what is now known as Zaire, there is the Chemin de Fer de Bas-Congo au Katanga, built to connect the mineral rich Katanga to the sea. In Congo there is the Congo-Ocean Railway, built expressly to facilitate the transportation of manganese ore from Gabon, as well as forest products. In Nigeria the Kano-Apapa railway line was built to facilitate the collection of cotton, groundnuts and cocoa for export. And the Enugu-Port Harcourt line was built to serve the oil-palm trade.

The railway systems of colonial Africa are an excellent example of the disarticulation of the colonial economy. They did not constitute in any country a

coherent system of communications. Neither did they contribute to the building of a coherent economy. They were built ad hoc according to the metropolitan interests of the moment and the availability of funds. The incoherence of the railway system rendered related ancillary communication facilities chaotic as well. For instance, the ports tended to be built at the terminals of the railways; since the location of the desired commodity rather than by the location of the prospective port of exit, it meant that the ports were not necessarily located where they would yield the maximum benefit to the development of the country.

Another similar to the development of railways happened in the development of primary commodities under colonialism. Colonial capitalism was naturally interested only in the most profitable commodities. To get an adequate supply of the preferred commodities it was sometimes necessary to discourage the production of some other commodities. When this necessity arose it was accepted without too much thought being wasted on implications of encouraging or discouraging the production of particular commodities. It was assumed that what was good for international capital was good for the colony. More often than not colonial capitalism used persuasion or force to compel a concentration of efforts on the production of particular export crops.

This upset the balance of the traditional economy, as was the case in Ghana. It was after the colonisation of Ghana that cocoa was successfully grown in the colony. But the production of cocoa grew so rapidly that it soon began to dominate the Ghanaian economy. Ghana had not started exporting cocoa until about 1885. By 1901 the country was already the biggest producer of cocoa in the world. By 1939 cocoa accounted for about 80% of the value of Ghana's exports. This sort of change led to disequilibrium, for instance shortages in the supply of traditional food crops, changes in land use creating changes in land tenure, displacement of people and shifts in population, the uneven development of different regions, the dependence of the economy on a few export crops, and associated with all these, profoundly unbalanced economic growth.

Another important effect of colonialism in Africa was the emergence and institutionalisation of classes and class struggle in the socio-economic and political life. Colonialism aided a clear emergence and development of classes in Africa. These classes include comprador bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, proletariat and the peasant. The African petty bourgeoisie serve as the conveyor belt through which the colonialists exploited and siphoned the economy of African countries. There is a great harmony of interest between the African petty bourgeoisie and the European comprador bourgeoisie. This was why during the period of political independence; it was the African petty bourgeoisie that got the mantle of leadership. The African petty bourgeoisie maintained the same relationship with the erstwhile colonial masters and this is why they run the economy and political administration of their states in the same manner as the colonialists did.

The African petty bourgeoisie maintained the long exploitation of the proletariat and the peasant classes. The rampant and complex nature of political instability and socio-economic malaise being experienced in most Africa states today has recourse to the nature and character of classes introduced in Africa by colonialism. The economic and other resources of Africa are shared between the



petty bourgeoisie and their European/American colonial counterparts, even in the contemporary time. The severe impoverishment of most African petty bourgeoisie leaders and marginalisation as well as oppression of the masses by those who have access to state power are offshoot of colonialism and colonial hang-over among African states

## CONCLUSION

By 1885, when Africa was politically and juridically partitioned, the peoples and polities had already lost a great deal of freedom. In its relations with the external world, Africa had lost a considerable amount of control over its own economy, ever since the 15th century. However, the loss of political sovereignty at the time of the scramble was decisive. By the same reasoning, it is clear that the regaining of political sovereignty by the 1960s constitutes an escapable first step in regaining maximum freedom to choose and to develop in all spheres.

Furthermore, the period of nationalist revolution gave rise to certain minority ideological trends, which represent the roots of future African development. Most African leaders of the intelligentsia and even of the labor movement were frankly capitalist, and shared fully the ideology of their bourgeoisie masters. Houphouet Boigny was at one time called a Communist by the French colonisers. He defended himself vigorously against this false charge in 1948:

We have good relations with the French Communist Party, that is true. But it is obvious that does not mean that we ourselves are communists. Can it be said that I, Houphouet Boigny- a traditional chief, a doctor of medicine, a big property owner, a catholic- can it be said that I am a communist?

His reasoning applied to so many more African leaders of the independence epoch. The exceptions were those who either completely rejected the world-view of capitalism or at least stuck honestly to those idealistic tenets of bourgeoisie ideology such as individual freedom and, through experience, they could come to realise that the ideals remained myths in a society based on the exploitation of man by man.

Finally, we may ask, is it inherent in the very nature of underdevelopment that makes development such an impossible task? Among the many prescriptions, after “flag independence,” that have been offered- e.g. cultural, social, psychological, even economic- none has produced any encouraging results. In fact nearly all of them have had negative result, and made bad situations worse. Are we to continue with the same experiments at the expense of the people, who, have borne the whole burden of these experiments throughout the last decades this is the question to which all the developing countries, especially those in Africa, must address themselves. And the sooner the better, because there is very little time left before our economies become permanently distorted and probably too damaged for any meaningful reconstruction in the future.

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