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*Teaching History*

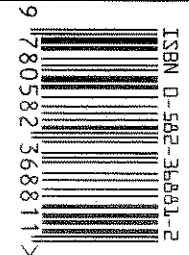
One of the 'classics' in the series, Professor Chamberlain's *Scramble for Africa* was first published in 1974 and has been used by countless students ever since. Other than minor, early corrections this is the first proper revision of the book. The author has taken the opportunity to update the text where necessary, in particular the Assessment Section has been largely rewritten, and to redo the bibliography from scratch.

Unlike other studies, long or short, *The Scramble for Africa* does not just concentrate on the politics and diplomacy of Europe but gives equal attention to African history as we now understand it. The book contrasts the Victorian image of Africa with the Africa which has been revealed by historians over the past thirty years. Professor Chamberlain uses case histories from Egypt to Zimbabwe to examine the European partition and conquest of the continent. She also examines the explanations offered for the phenomenon and asks whether they were Euro-centric or peripheral, economic, political or strategic.

The main text is supported by primary source material in the Documents Section. Some of the material is otherwise unpublished (e.g. old Foreign Office Confidential Prints) and much of it would not be easily accessible elsewhere (e.g. extracts from nineteenth-century official papers and books long out of print). Revised, reset and reissued in the larger format now established for the series, the new edition is sure to be welcomed by a new generation of students.

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Covers: "The reception of the first British administrator to visit Ikingi, Caprain Ambrose, by the then Oyoza in 1895: wooden doors carved by Olowe of Isr for the palace of the Oyoza, Yoruba tribe, Nigeria." Photos: John R. Freeman, reproduced courtesy of the British Museum.



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# The Scramble for Africa

Second Edition

M. F. CHAMBERLAIN

SEMINAR STUDIES

IN HISTORY



CHAMBERLAIN

THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

SEMINAR STUDIES

## PART THREE: ASSESSMENT

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### 8 CONCLUSION

The Scramble for Africa lasted at most twenty years but, during that period, it went through a number of distinct phases. In the early and mid-1880s no European power or statesman (with the possible exception of Leopold of the Belgians) had any very clear idea of what territory they wished to acquire in Africa, or indeed whether they wished to acquire any at all. Yet it was during this period that the most critical decisions were taken. Practically all the significant maritime powers of western Europe (with the important exception of the Dutch who were content with their possessions in the Far East) gathered into their respective 'spheres of influence' those fragments of Africa which history, or other accidental circumstances, placed within their grasp. It was done without enthusiasm. It was also done without effective political opposition at home. It was as if politicians and public alike were so taken by surprise by an unprecedented turn of events that they could not immediately formulate their attitudes.

This was particularly true in Britain. The fact that a Liberal government, under William Gladstone, was in power from 1880 to 1885 added to the confusion. Nothing would be more mistaken than to see a simple division between right (imperialist) and left (anti-imperialist) in British politics in the late nineteenth century. Both Conservatives and Liberals had been perfectly happy with the situation in the middle of the century when 'moral suasion' seemed to give Britain strong influence on both the east and the west coast of Africa without the expense and possible danger of direct intervention [116]. Both Conservatives and Liberals had to face the situation after about 1870 when the rise of powerful new industrial states challenged their old-established trading supremacy. The change in British thinking can be discerned as early as Gladstone's first administration of 1868-74. Previously it had been fashionable to express mildly 'separatist' views, to believe that Britain's existing colonies, mainly colonies of settlement, would 'grow to maturity' and separate from the mother country in, it

was hoped, an amiable and mutually agreeable manner [136]. The first reaction against this was anything but extravagant and jingoistic. It represented a sober realisation that colonies might have their uses and it concerned itself almost entirely with the colonies of settlement. It found expression in the establishment of the Colonial Society (later the Royal Colonial Institute) in 1868, where eminent men met to read papers and discuss questions of imperial interest. Its members represented a wide political spectrum. Lord Granville, Edward Cardwell and H. C. E. Childers from the Liberal side, Lord Salisbury, Lord Carnarvon and Sir Stafford Northcote from the Conservative side, were among its founders. The Society certainly had no thought of advocating an expansion of empire but, once admit that existing colonies are of value and should be defended, certain consequences begin to flow. In African terms it was Gladstone's government of 1868-74, not their Conservative successors, who inaugurated a forward policy on the Gold Coast [84]. The Conservatives were responsible for the British forward policy in South Africa but they subsequently maintained, with some plausibility, that they had successfully pursued the old policy of 'influence' in Egypt, with French cooperation, in the 1870s and that it had been Liberal blunders which led to the breakdown of that policy in the 1880s [163]. In West and East Africa and as far south as Bechuanaland it was Gladstone's government which committed the country to the acquisition of spheres of influence and 'protectorates' in the critical period 1884-86. Their reluctance and even bewilderment at this turn of events is obvious from both their official despatches and their private letters.

Similar uncertainty is discernible in France and Germany. France, like Britain, had a long colonial history but, after their decisive defeat by Germany in 1871, Frenchmen were deeply divided between those who wished to seek compensation overseas and those who saw overseas adventures as a distraction from the reassertion of their true role in Europe. Some, like Camille Pelletan, lamented 'Alsace-Lorraine is under the Prussian jackboot and our army is leaving for Tonkin'. Some saw all overseas commitments as a Bismarckian trap into which France must not fall. But a colonial lobby can be identified even in the 1880s. Jules Ferry, himself a Lorrainer, defended the French advance in Tunis and in Indo-China. Freycinet was much more interested in grandiose schemes for West Africa than was once realised. Army and navy officers were active in both West Africa and Indo-China. But the French public was by no means convinced in the mid-1880s. When things went wrong in Tunis in 1881 or in Tonkin in 1885, governments fell and politicians' heads rolled — very nearly literally on the latter occasion [75, 132, 140].

Germany, too, was divided. Many Germans saw their country as essentially a continental one and could generate no enthusiasm for overseas adventures. Others felt that the next step to the German victory of 1871 was the establishment of Germany as a world power. A few even advocated that Germany should annex the French colonies as part of the peace settlement of 1871. They elicited little response at that time from Bismarck. But a substantial colonial lobby grew up centred on the great trading ports of Hamburg and Bremen. By 1884 Bismarck himself conceded that colonialism was a significant election issue [36, 54, 65, 129].

This period of indiscriminate grab and bewildered politicians and public did not last long. Bismarck was the first to see that these new African issues could be harnessed to the general purposes of European diplomacy. Domestic pressures undoubtedly played a part in Bismarck's actions in 1884–85 but he also seized the opportunity to try, however unsuccessfully, to reach a new understanding with France [44, 51, 132, 192]. In Britain Salisbury and Rosebery were men of a different stamp from Granville and Gladstone. In the late 1880s and the 1890s the diplomatic game in Africa took on more ordered forms, culminating in the British case with the carefully planned conquest of the Sudan. In France politicians like Hanotaux, Étienne and Delcassé had equally carefully formulated objectives that they tried with varying degrees of success to obtain [20, 41].

But if governments and imperial enthusiasts began to marshal their arguments and plan their campaigns, so too did the critics and opponents of imperialism. The British occupation of Egypt in 1882 occurred without effective opposition at home but within two years it had become the *locus classicus* of the radical charge that governments had allowed themselves to become the pawns of the financiers. One of the earliest manifestations of this was a pamphlet by Seymour Keay, *Spoiling the Egyptians: A Tale of Shame*, published in 1882. It was further developed by T. Rothstein in his *Egypt's Ruin* (1910). It was referred to by H. N. Brailsford in his *The War of Steel and Gold* (1914) and by Leonard Woolf in his *Empire and Commerce in Africa* (1920) [118, 137, 161]. It appeared almost unchanged as late as 1959 in John Strachey's *The End of Empire* in which he asserted:

What the British Government really wanted was that somehow or other the interest should be collected without Britain having to involve herself in the complications and responsibilities of conquering Egypt. But when it became clear that that was impossible, Britain

occupied and ruled Egypt and the Soudan rather than that the bondholders should lose their money. [160]

The Boer War was an even greater shock to British opinion and virtually brought to an end the brief popular enthusiasm for empire-building which had found expression in the Jubilee celebrations of 1897. It produced one great anti-imperialist book, J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism, a Study* [146]. It is significant that Hobson was a Liberal (with some socialist leanings) who was primarily interested in the social question at home. His condemnation of imperialism arose from his diagnosis of domestic economic ills. He popularised, although he did not originate, the 'surplus capital' theory of imperialism, which is that when industry produced more capital than could profitably be reinvested at home, financiers were compelled or encouraged to invest abroad. Having invested in unstable countries they demanded, successfully, that their governments should intervene, by force if necessary, to protect their investments [Doc. 24].

Lenin, on his own statement, took Hobson's work as the starting point for his own famous pamphlet, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* [151]. There were, however, essential differences between the two men, and it is misleading to speak of the Hobson-Lenin theory of imperialism as if their arguments were the same. First, Lenin was primarily interested in the German situation, where the finance capital provided by the banks operated in a somewhat different fashion from the industrial capital, generated by industry itself, which provided the source of most British investment abroad in this period. Secondly, and more important, Hobson saw imperialism as an aberration, a malfunctioning of the capitalist system, which ought to be corrected and which could be corrected if it was properly understood. Lenin saw it as the inevitable result of the capitalist system and an important symptom of its ultimate and inescapable decay [Doc. 25]. It was in this sense that he interpreted the First World War as the final 'imperialist war'.

Hobson's theories and some of Lenin's theories gained wide acceptance, far beyond the ranks of the orthodox Left. A reaction against the view that imperialism was essentially an economic phenomenon in which financiers played a particularly murky role began after the Second World War. The debate became entangled with the ideological positions of the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union. Financial explanations in particular came to be regarded as 'Marxist' and anathema to more conservative scholars. Some even shed away from accepting an economic basis for the whole phenomenon.

There are obvious errors and omissions in the earlier theories. Professor Sir Keith Hancock made a telling attack on Lenin's theory in a lecture, 'Wealth of Colonies' (1949) in which he pointed out that the particular stage of capitalist development which Lenin associated with imperialism – that of monopolies and cartels – came after 1900, that is after the Scramble for Africa was complete [145]. In an article in the *Economic History Review* in 1961 [133], D. K. Fieldhouse gathered together and analysed an impressive array of arguments casting doubt on financial explanations of the 'new imperialism'. If such explanations were correct, he argued, one would expect a clear correlation between financial involvement and new annexations. No such correlation exists. On the contrary, 'the places now to be taken over had hitherto attracted little capital, and did not attract it in any quantity subsequently'. There was undoubtedly considerable investment abroad by all the European powers, and above all by Britain in this period, but most of this went to traditional investment areas, like the United States. The whole German investment in Africa before 1914 amounted to only two-thirds of their investment in Austria-Hungary. D. C. M. Platt questioned whether individual financiers had any more influence on the British Foreign Office at the end of the nineteenth century than they did on Palmerston's Foreign Office or Cobden's Board of Trade. The Foreign Office, he maintained, had narrowly defined the circumstances in which the government would assist overseas investors and it adhered rigidly to these [157, 183].

Unhappy with economic explanations, a number of western writers began to offer alternative theories which emphasised political, strategic and diplomatic explanations. Detailed studies began to suggest that there was no over-arching theory which explained modern imperialism – or even one particular dramatic case such as the Scramble for Africa. Multi-causal explanations and an emphasis on events on 'the periphery' – that is outside Europe – became popular.

Dealing with the new imperialism as a whole, D. K. Fieldhouse saw it as a natural outcome of the militant nationalism which came to dominate Europe after the victory of Bismarck's blood-and-iron policy in the Franco-Prussian War. This allowed for a considerable psychological element. Empire was a popular cause and this 'ideological fervour [was the] natural outcome of this fevered nationalism, not the artifact of vested economic interests'. Further, it was one consequence of the tight alliance system that Bismarck imposed upon Europe – the system which caused Professor Medlicott to conclude that Bismarck 'made a deadlock and called it peace' [94]. Fieldhouse suggested:

Imperialism may best be seen as the extension into the periphery of the political struggle in Europe. At the centre the balance was so nicely adjusted that no positive action, no major change in the status or territory of either side was possible. Colonies thus became a means out of the impasse. [171]

Professors Robinson and Gallagher in a seminal book in 1961 put forward a specific explanation of the phenomenon of the Scramble for Africa. They were certainly not unaware of an economic dimension to the struggle but in their view 'as an explanation of European rule in tropical Africa, the theory of economic imperialism puts the trade before the flag, the capital before the conquest, the cart before the horse'. From one point of view the Scramble could be seen as a great extension of the Eastern Question. Defending her traditional interest in the route to India, Britain stumbled into Egypt in 1882. This caused a breakdown of its long-standing 'gentleman's agreement' with France on their respective spheres in West Africa. Concern for its route to India also compelled Britain to defend its established position in South Africa and to undertake new commitments in East Africa. Only after Africa had been partitioned for strategic reasons did the British government try to develop their sphere economically and the British public try to convince themselves that what they had done was a good thing [116]. In a later article Robinson and Gallagher went further and suggested that the whole partition of Africa was a 'remarkable freak'. It was always an aberration and the surprising thing was not that it collapsed in three-quarters of a century but that it survived so long. 'It would be a gullible historiography', they concluded, 'which could see such gimcrack creations as necessary functions of the balance of power or as the highest stage of capitalism' [Doc. 27] [184].

Marxists fought back. There was now the additional embarrassment that Lenin appeared to have regarded imperialism as an apocalyptic sign of the approach of the great revolution and the triumph of the proletariat but fifty years later the European powers were dismantling their empires and capitalism still flourished. Most took the line that Lenin had been misunderstood [138]. A non-Marxist, Eric Stokes, had suggested that escape route in 1969 [191], arguing that Lenin saw the partition of Africa and Asia as only the preliminary phase of imperialism, although Lenin's many ambiguities meant that the whole argument eventually ran into the sand.

Other historians also resisted the jettisoning of the economic dimension. In the long controversy that was waged in the academic journals, D. C. M. Platt had reached the conclusion as early as 1968,



'There is much in late-Victorian imperial expansion which cannot be explained by economic factors but there is much which can' [183]. Fieldhouse himself gave them due weight in his *Economics and Empire* [144]. Undeniably, contemporaries had argued for expansion in economic terms [Docs 12, 17]. For the first time in history there were a number of highly industrialised nations in a situation of cut-throat competition. Many were returning to protectionist policies. Politicians were particularly nervous and business confidence was badly undermined by the widespread and little understood phenomenon of the 'Great Depression'. Every instinct of the businessmen seemed to be to grab their markets and their sources of raw material while they could. Politicians dared not resist. They were partially convinced too. So was the general public.

It is not easy to quantify, but the evidence seems to suggest that the working classes had (as both Hobson and Lenin allow) been won for the imperial cause. Hobson and Lenin saw this support as the result of a confidence trick on the part of the tiny minority who were likely actually to benefit by imperialism. This is possible. But it is also possible that there was among the working classes a hard-headed appreciation of the dangers threatening the ordinary worker in the new situation of international competition. It was easier for the investor to switch his investments than for the Lancashire cotton operative to find new employment if the British textile industry lost its markets. Hobson began with an examination of the social problem at home and came to the conclusion that imperialism was a false answer [Doc. 24]. Other men began with a similar preoccupation with domestic problems – Joseph Chamberlain in Britain, Friedrich Fabri in Germany, for example – and concluded that empire-building was the only safe way out [91, 36]. They did not expect immediate returns. They were 'pegging out claims for posterity', safeguarding 'undeveloped estates' [174]. For a generation they were, on the whole, believed. Imperialism became, as Fieldhouse says, 'the ideology of millions' [171].

In some instances modern research has confirmed the existence of close relations between bankers and politicians. Stern described the German banker, Bleichroder, as the 'midwife' of Leopold's Congo, although he also concluded that the financiers were the servants rather than the masters of the politicians [125]. Cain and Hopkins in their important *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* [141] showed the close connections between government and the City of London.

A new explanation, essentially economic, appeared (or at least received much greater emphasis) to explain British imperialism. Britain

was already a declining power. Its industry, although still growing, was not keeping pace with those of Germany and the United States. Britain's expansion was not, as it appeared, the result of over-flowing confidence, but a desperate rearguard action to retain its place in the world. [111] This view is challenged in turn by Cain and Hopkins, who point out that Britain after all secured the 'most valuable parts' of Africa in competition with Germany and France. Britain was proactive, rather than simply reactive, and the necessary dynamism came from the City (of London), the home of 'gentlemanly capitalism' [141, 166] [Doc. 28].

The end of the Cold War and its attendant ideologies would seem to have re-opened the whole question of the role of capital in the Scramble. But over-arching theories are still in retreat before multi-causal explanations. The defence of India [116] or a rearguard defence of a declining economy [111] might offer a plausible reason for British actions but can hardly be extrapolated to other Powers. Cain and Hopkins's emphasis on the City leaves out of account the role of the northern industrialists.

More intangible factors too may be due for reassessment. The mindset of late Victorians is so alien to the world view of Europeans (especially young Europeans) on the threshold of the twenty-first century that it can be almost incomprehensible. Yet it was the milieu in which the Victorians operated. Imperialism was believed to be right in the sense that it was in the national interest. It was believed to be right in other ways too. It was benefiting the 'backward' native, bringing him up to the standards of western civilisation [Doc. 26]. This made imperialism attractive to many liberals and humanitarians. A number of Fabians, including Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb, saw great possibilities for good in imperialism, as well as many things to be criticised [159]. Imperialism was accepted as right in a third way too. Although some intellectuals raised doubts, most people in the late nineteenth century accepted the idea of progress in human affairs as self-evident. Theories of evolution were generally applied to societies. Western societies were further advanced than African or Asian societies. It was both proper and inevitable that the more advanced would conquer and rule the less advanced. In the end it would be to the advantage of both. But above all it was inescapable. Many imperialists – Cecil Rhodes was perhaps the most striking example – felt that they were in tune with the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of history, and this gave them both a comforting assurance that they were on the winning side and a kind of absolution for any dubious acts they might have to commit in fulfilling an inevitable and ultimately benevolent destiny [Doc. 19b].

But where in all this did the African stand? Peripheral theories at least opened the way for him to play an active role in his own destiny. Marxist theories were of necessity Eurocentric – it was overripe and failing capitalism in the developed countries that had triggered the whole process. Rather ironically, in rejecting this conservatives began for the first time to take seriously the role of the non-European. Ronald Robinson suggested that European intervention often destabilised foreign societies and created warring factions among whom Europeans could find allies [156]. In their article in the *Cambridge Modern History*, Robinson and Gallagher suggested an even more radical explanation. They wrote, ‘the crucial changes that set all working took place in Africa itself ... The last quarter of the nineteenth century has often been called the “Age of Imperialism”. Yet much of this imperialism was no more than an involuntary reaction of Europe to the various proto-nationalisms of Islam’ [Doc. 27] [184].

Africans were not passive, as was at one time supposed, in the nineteenth century. They were peoples with a long history who had already held the Europeans at bay for centuries. In the short run, however, the imbalance of technological power was so great that the political decisions of the late nineteenth century do seem to have been those of the Europeans. Even the most casual glance at the modern map of Africa reveals those straight state boundaries along lines of latitude and longitude which were clearly drawn in the chancelleries of Europe and bore little relationship to African conditions. On the other hand it is true that Islam, originally a foreign importation but one which the Africans had long ago made their own, began a period of revival in the late nineteenth century [24]. Sometimes this reinforced political resistance to the European invader as in Algeria, Egypt, the Egyptian Sudan or the emirates of the Western Sudan which fought hard against the French advance. Essentially, however, when the Africans sufficiently rallied their forces to throw off the foreign yoke – which they did within a century of the conquest – they fought their conquerors with their own ideological weapons. Their rallying cries were nationalism, self-determination, democracy, socialism. No doubt at least the last three of these had existed in their own forms in African societies in the past but it would be false history to suggest that, as they were formulated in the twentieth century, they did not derive directly from the west. The colonial conquests of the nineteenth century ended Africa’s isolation, which had been marked in recent centuries. Rapidly, and sometimes brutally, Africa was dragged into the twentieth century. Not everything the Europeans brought was bad. Medicine and new methods of agriculture were

generally good. Political ideas could be used for good or ill. But what is now clear is that in Africa, as in Asia, this was but one more layer superimposed upon an already vigorous people with a long history.