Historical Interpretations of the Partition of Africa

3 Main Approaches:
1. Metropolitan – Focus on the motivations of the Europeans.
2. Peripheral – focus on the African perspective and why each region was captured.
3. International Relations – sets the partition within a global framework.

Metropolitan Theories

The main area of debate within these theories is over the extent to which economic factors drove Britain’s imperialism and the nature of these economic forces.

Hobson: Overseas investment  
*Imperialism: A study (1902)*

‘The British Government supported a small elite group of ‘greedy capitalist’ investors in Africa.

The main argument is that the capitalist elite in Britain preferred to invest in new economies overseas rather than higher wages and improved living standards for the British workers. His evidence is that British overseas investment increased more than 10 times between 1862 and 1893.

Fieldhouse (1973) argues that most investment went to settlement colonies, the USA and Latin America – not tropical Africa! Also, that Hobson ignored strategic issues such as the protection of the Suez canal and the trade routes to India.

Lenin: Crisis of Capitalism  
*Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism (1916)*

Imperialism was caused by a crisis in the capitalist system. Too many nations chasing too few markets lead inevitably to colonial rivalry.

Governments were simply doing the bidding of capitalist businessmen by attempting to dominate sources of raw materials for their companies’ advancement.

For Lenin, the end of imperialism would come only when capitalism had been overthrown.

Schumpeter: Crisis of Hereditary Elites  
The Sociology of Imperialism (1951)

Imperialism was driven by ‘old aristocratic hereditary elites’ who passed on ideas of imperial glory and aristocratic superiority from generation to generation.

Aristocrats sought power and glory abroad because they felt in danger of extinction at home from the rising middle and lower classes.

However, many aristocrats in Britain favoured peaceful economic expansion and social reform. Most British administrators in the new colonies of Africa were not aristocrats, but rather professionals from the middle classes. Even King Leopold was mainly interested in the scientific and economic rewards to be gained from African expansion.

Schumpeter claimed that when the power of the aristocracy was weakened and governments followed purely capitalist policies, then imperialism would no longer exist. However, the suggestion that the end of the aristocracy would see an end to all wars of conquest is not borne out by the history of conflict in the 20th Century.
**Hobsbawm: Industry & Empire**

Industry & Empire (1968)

For Hobsbawm, the technological advances of the 19th Century made conquest inevitable as weak pre-industrial peoples were subjugated by the strong. The partition of Africa would not and could not have occurred without the technology gap.

**Cain & Hopkins: ‘Gentlemanly Capitalists’**

British Imperialism (1993)

There is no link between industrialisation or economics and imperial expansion, because there is a great deal of continuity in the development of British Imperial expansion from 1688 to 1914.

Their argument is that the elites who had led the imperialism of the 18th century (pre industrial) were the ones who established the financial and service based economy that had developed by the 19th century.

New ‘gentlemen’ were born out of this financial revolution and joined the old elites to form a new elite which Cain & Hopkins called the Gentlemanly Capitalists. They were southerners who were educated in the most prestigious schools usually in the South (Eton, Harrow etc), went to Oxbridge and combined city life with a country home. They married into the old aristocracy and created the old-boy network which dominated government both at home and throughout the empire.

Cain & Hopkin argue that this group naturally put the interests of ‘gentlemanly capitalists’ above those of Northern Industrialists who were the result of the industrial revolution.

The government claimed that they were putting ‘National interests’ first, but in reality they were defending the investments and interests of the ‘gentlemanly capitalists of London and the South East.

The most important aspect of the British economy was the financial and service sector and the protection of investments overseas. Note that it is very clearly linked to Hobson's theory from 1902! The main difference is that Cain & Hopkins do not think there was any kind of conspiracy, they simply think that since the gentlemen capitalists were the same sort of people as the politicians, their interests simply coincided.

This theory could be used to explain

- the survival of the City of London
- the dominance of the S.East
- the decline of Northern industry
- the decline of the Empire

They have been criticised for being too Anglo-Centric i.e. what about the wider world? Others have argued that the interests of northern industrialists cannot be separated from the interests of the City of London. Have Cain and Hopkins oversimplified the relationship between government and business; between industry and finance; and between London and the Empire? It is too early to tell and more research must be done. What is sure is that just focusing on Industry is not enough to explain the empire and that the work of ‘gentlemen’ who managed ‘men not machines’ certainly played a role. The debate is over how much of a role.

Another important effect of the gentlemanly capitalist theory is that it rejects the fashion for focusing on peripheral issues and ignoring the metropole.