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"Presenting the Empire"

A Review of:

European Imperialism 1830 - 1930

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Section 33

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European Imperialism edited by Alice Conklin and Ian Fletcher is a compilation of academic research on various social aspects of the New Imperialism period in history. Taken alone, each article gives insight into one single aspect of one single country. However, tying together several of the contributions inside, one can discern themes ranging from the image portrayed of the dominated colonies in Europe, to racism and white superiority, and finally to nationalism. These do more than tell us about the New Imperialism; they give us insight into how the post-colonial world developed as it is today.

The lowly image of the non-European peoples throughout the world had been shaped in several ways, and as a result led to their denigration by colonizers, perpetuating a cycle of perception and treatment that only strengthened the imperial argument. Michael Adas, in his article "The Machine as Civilizer" relates an account of a European traveling up the Gambia river, who while showing the steam boat captain how to use scientific instruments, encounters a group of natives who react to the instruments as if they were a sort of doomsday weapon. The reaction by the Europeans showed their belief in the natives' inherent inferiority (67). Adas goes on to say that "achievements in material culture, especially those relating to technology and science, ... shap[ed] European perceptions of non-Western peoples even before the Industrial Revolution" (69). It certainly follows from this that native peoples were kept in an inferior place by the technology wielded by the colonizers. "Troops [could be] moved about quickly to places where the 'natives' showed signs of unrest" (71), but just as well the "train was an object of awe" (72). The railroad, a sign of technological, if not racial superiority functioned both to keep the natives in their places both mentally and physically. However, European dominators came to view the implementation of technology as a way to civilize the

"savage" peoples both as a means and an end (72). Gandhi would be quick to retort, "it is machinery that has impoverished India" (27). True, it seems Europe's advanced materialistic society allowed them to view natives as savages, and this led to their treatment as such.

Looking down upon the non-Western peoples of the world as savages perpetuated both exotic and racist ideas of the "other" people in the world. In Çelik's article "Displaying the Orient", he argues that the exhibitions in Western countries of different colonies around the world was organized in such a way to emphasize the "strangeness" and the "distance" of these places (143). As such, these displays "...reaffirmed the colonizing society's 'racial superiority,' manifest in its technical, scientific, and moral development ..." (143). The way these exhibitions treated colonial subjects both as prizes and objects of research emphasized these feelings. In the Universal Exposition of 1867 in Paris, the organizers even went so far as to falsify replicas of city sections in order to make them seem more authentic (146). This would portray other civilizations as being untouched by technology and the West, however, innovative projects by the colonizers, like the Suez Canal, would be revealed in the backdrops of these exhibitions to exemplify the good brought on by imperialism. This happy little show did little to illustrate the realities of colonial empires. In Timothy Burke's article, entitled "Colonialism, Cleanliness, and Civilization in Colonial Rhodesia," we learn that the white minority looked upon Africans as quite dirty--a belief which stems from early classifications of Africans being syphilitic, which was misunderstood to be contagious through touch (85). This led invariably to an obsession with soap. Like the exhibitions of colonies in Europe, advertisements for products in colonial Rhodesia were just as racist. One advertisement in the nineteen-forties stated "the

day of the witch-doctor's craft and all its evils are over. Today educated Africans know that disease is spread by germs...[buy] ATLAS soap" (94). Such advertisements targeted African males and emphasized the inferiority of their ancestors, which is not to say that they viewed Africans of the time with any less contempt. Such an advertisement makes it seem as if an African male will attain respect from their white dominators if they wash with such a soap. Linking it all together, the advanced material society that existed in the West paved the European view of natives as inferior, and by bringing their technological superiority to the rest of the world, some Europeans believed they were enlightening the savagery. This high held view that the West had of themselves only engendered more imperialism, but more importantly, it broadened racist views and classifications of non-Westerners as uncivilized subordinates.

This carries over to the theme of racism as discussed in the book. W.E.B. Dubois wrote in "It's a Racial Issue", that "the older idea was that the whites would eventually displace the native races and inherit their lands, but this idea has been rudely shaken in the increase of American Negroes, the experience of the English in Africa, India, and the West Indies, and the development of South America. The policy of expansion, then, simply means world problems of the Color Line"(21). Indeed, imperial policies only proliferated racism throughout the world. In Tyler Stovall's article "Colonial Workers in France during the Great War," he describes a French policy to conscript workers and troops from their colonies in order to secure France during the First World War (166). Out of fear for conflicts with French workers, a regimented system was established whereby the conscripts were isolated in their living and working quarters from other French citizens (166). The result of this was worse living conditions for these workers, because wages

were kept low, and they were treated more like slaves than guest workers (167). They would be harassed and classified as weak spirited or lazy, and physically weak. French workers were openly hostile to the unwelcome economic competition brought to France from the colonies, and although the French were known to be xenophobic in the broadest sense, they were particularly racist against these workers (169). More than not it seems, imperialism brought out the worst of racist attitudes. This regimented system did everything but allow these foreigner workers to come to an understanding with their fellow French workers. As Dubois might say, imperialism increased the problems of the Color Line.

Other acts of racism in the colonies were particular of ambiguous imperial attitudes, namely the place in society for mulattos. In "Miscegenation and Identity in French West Africa," Owen White depicts the success of a Eurafrikan organization in French West Africa to make a place for mulattos in society (131). On the one hand, mulattos were a taboo, because they were orphans or bastards of an "immoral" conception between the dominant white man and the savage African, but on the other hand they could use their special mixture of race to their benefit. This was achieved by creating a society of mulattos that accepted one another and could elevate the status of the mulatto to something of an intermediary between colonizer and colonized. "The society aimed to ensure that 'Eurafrikanis Francais' were treated on equal terms with French people from the métropole," but their relations to other Africans would not be marginalized (135). While the mulattos were able to use special aspects of their ethnic makeup to battle racism and elevate their status, it was not so easy for the rest to do so. In W.E.B. Dubois' article he concludes, "The magic word of 'white' is already broken, and the Color Line in civilization

has been crossed in modern times as it was in the great past. The awakening of the yellow races is certain. That the awakening of the brown and black races will follow in time, no unprejudiced student of history can doubt"(22). Racism was therefore an extremely unfortunate result of imperialism, but little by little, both in violent and non-violent ways, the foundations of racism began to be chipped away as the colonized proved their equal status and attained for themselves home rule.

This leads us to the last theme in the book, "Nationalism and Uprisings," which is heavily influenced by the articles dealing with racism. Unlike European nationalism, the native people of imperial colonies united themselves under their own form of nation, heavily qualified by unification under domination, whether those native peoples had the same linguistic or religious characteristics or not. A more post-colonial argument is set forth by Partha Chatterjee in the article "The Nation and the Home." Today the West has taken away nationalism as something to be proud of in the previously colonized areas of the world. Today our views of nationalism are tainted with darkness due not only to the tragedies of the Second World War but also to the corrupt genocidal regimes which emerged from the nationalistic freedom won by colonies worldwide (213). Ironically, however, the glorification of nationalism during the imperialist period heavily influenced those who fought for home rule (214). The author argues more about the spiritual domain of nationalism, which did not as much have to do with realizing a commonality between peoples under foreign rule, but more with the development of a society unlike that of the West, in effect becoming autonomous under the noses of imperial watch. The spiritual domain of nationalism encompasses taking back one's own language, art, teaching, and traditional practices, thus making a once savage seeming practice into a modern

non-Western institution (218). Thus, the racist problems of some post-colonial countries arose out of different conceptions of the nation. The spiritual aspect of a nation which delivered most colonies into statehood came head to head with the material aspect of a nation--the European classification of peoples by language and religion (220).

Benedict Anderson argues differently in his article, "Imagined Community in Anticolonial Nationalism," speaking mainly of populist and systematic (Machiavellian) nationalism, products of colonial domination (209). The native intelligentsia in the colonies used their knowledge of the colonizer's language to access their history and concepts of the nation-state (210). Such people, like the Javanese nationalist Suwardi, pointed out how outrageous it was that the Dutch would celebrate their independence among those whom they dominate. Anderson shows that the Indonesians who have a very diverse religious and linguistic makeup share a common nationality due to the schooling put in place by the Dutch. This system was very centralized and made the diverse groups of Indonesians feel as if they were part of the same body (212). Both Anderson and Chatterjee add dimensions to the anti-colonialist nationalism which greatly differentiate themselves from European nationalism. It shows that under the same domination, colonized peoples developed a sense of who they were, partly instilled by the colonizers, and partly a product of redeveloping their "savage" cultures into something modern.

In the imperialist, colonialist context the three themes of portrayal, racism, and nationalism all come together to produce a picture of how the colonial empires developed and eventually broke apart. The technological arrogance of white Westerners gave rise to racism, and the projected dominance of these colonizers eventually united the oppressed in most cases to where the post-colonial state emerged.