

Hobson's Imperialism

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AT THE TIME he wrote his famous book, J. A. Hobson believed that the inhabitants of Africa and other backward parts of the world were biologically inferior to the white races. He did not favor independence or self-government for the parts of the world which were then included in the great European empires; on the contrary, he thought that they should be kept under firm control and forcibly civilized. He suspected that the natives in these areas put

such a high value on leisure that they would not produce enough tropical products to satisfy the needs of Europe. As a remedy for this situation he proposed that they be forced to work until the demands of the European consumers had been satisfied.

This is not, of course, the popular image of Hobson. Having presented this radical re-interpretation of his work it is incumbent upon me to first prove that I am right

and then try to explain how the contrary impression became so widespread. The first task is fairly simple: all that is necessary is to examine the chapter in *Imperialism* entitled "Imperialism and the Lower Races."¹ The title of the chapter, with its simple acceptance of the existence of "lower races" should be something of a shock to many present day progressives. In fact, Hobson seems a little disturbed by it himself. Although "lower races" appears without quotation marks in the title and is usually bare of them in the text, occasionally he does insert them; nevertheless, he obviously never entertained any real doubts that some races are in fact inferior. For example, he distinguishes between ". . . countries inhabited by what appear to be definitely low-typed, unprogressive races, countries whose people manifest capacity of rapid progress from a present low condition, and countries like India and China, where an old civilization of a high type . . . exists." (pp. 224-25.) Hobson was a Lamarckian, and believed that an improved environment could improve a race's heredity, so his acceptance of racial inferiority for some groups did not imply that they would always be inferior. Nevertheless, his position is far from that of the present day liberal.

Turning to Hobson's views on imposing outside control on an underdeveloped area, his position is well set forth in the following passage:

In considering the ethics and politics of this interference, we must not be bluffed or blinded by critics who fasten on the palpable dishonesty of many practices of the gospel of "the dignity of labour" and "the mission of civilization." The real issue is whether, and under what circumstances, it is justifiable for Western nations to use compulsory government for the control and education in the arts of industrial and politi-

cal civilization of the inhabitants of tropical countries and other so-called lower races. Because Rhodesian mine-owners or Cuban sugar-growers stimulate the British or American Government to Imperialism by parading motives and results which do not really concern them, it does not follow that these motives under proper guidance are unsound, or that the results are undesirable.

There is nothing unworthy, quite the contrary, in the notion that nations which, through a more stimulative environment, have advanced further in certain arts of industry, politics, or morals, should communicate these to nations which from their circumstances were more backward, so as to aid them in developing alike the material resources of their land and the human resources of their people. Nor is it clear that in this work some "inducement, stimulus, or pressure" (to quote a well-known phrase), or in a single word, "compulsion," is wholly illegitimate. Force is itself no remedy, coercion is not education, but it may be a prior condition to the operation of educative forces. Those, at any rate, who assign any place to force in the education or the political government of individuals in a nation can hardly deny that the same instrument may find a place in the civilization of backward by progressive nations.

Assuming that the arts of "progress," or some of them, are communicable, a fact which is hardly disputable, there can be no inherent natural right in a people to refuse that measure of compulsory education which shall raise it from childhood to manhood in the order of nationalities. The analogy furnished by the education of a child is *prima facie* a sound one, and is not invalidated by the dangerous abuses to which it is exposed in practice. (pp. 228-29.)

Kipling put the same thought in fewer words:

Take up the white man's burden
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
A hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit
And work another's gain.

There is a good deal of sense and even a good deal of idealism in this Hobson-Kipling position on the backward areas. Recent experience with countries "liberated" from imperialist controls has led numerous observers to reconsider the simplistic anti-imperialism which was so fashionable in the 40's and early 50's. It is now realized that the problem is a great deal more complicated than was previously supposed. Even the most anti-imperialistic thinkers now concede that the record of imperialism was not all black, and that outside control of a backward nation may be to its advantage. My purpose, however, is not to assess the merits of Hobson's position, but to point out that it was not what is generally assumed. The Hobson of present day mythology could never be coupled with Kipling on imperialism.

Hobson, however, went beyond Kipling in his arguments for empire. Kipling always wrote of the British Empire as benefiting the "natives" and never suggested that it might directly exploit them for the benefit of England. Hobson was not so inhibited. In his *Imperialism* he discusses with apparent approval the views of the "Fabian Imperialists."² Here he points out that the "European races require large imports of products of the tropics"; that the natives of the tropic are "indolent and torpid" and do not "develop the arts of industry at any satisfactory pace," and that therefore "it is our duty to see that they [the tropic lands] are developed for the good of the world." Thus he was willing to

sanction the establishment of imperial control even if it did not in any way benefit the natives who might "prefer to live on a low standard of life with little labor." (p. 228)

On the whole, Hobson's views on this matter were similar to those of the bulk of the socialists in the pre-1914 period.³ They were highly critical of the capitalist governments of Europe and, by extension, of the way these capitalist states ran their colonies, but they were not opposed to control of backward areas by European states. They, in fact, felt that they themselves were particularly well-qualified to spread civilization among the savages. In general, enthusiasm for empire among the socialists of Europe was directly proportional to the strength of the Socialist party in each country. Bernstein, as a leader of the powerful German Socialist Party took a pro-imperialist position on the ground that a Socialist Germany would need colonies during the transitional period before the rest of the world became socialist. "Moreover, only a conditional right of savages to the land occupied by them can be recognized. The higher civilizations ultimately can claim a higher right."⁴

Regardless of the possible merits of these views, they are not the views now customarily attributed to socialists. Certainly this is not the prevailing image of Hobson. How, then, did the orthodox interpretation come to prevail? In part the answer lies in a piece of obfuscation by Lenin. Lenin defined imperialism as "the last stage of capitalism." Under this definition—and it was accepted surprisingly widely in the 30's and 40's—the phrase "capitalistic imperialism" is redundant, and the phrase "Socialist imperialism" constitutes a contradiction in terms. By this simple linguistic trick, the vigorous criticisms, found in Hobson's *Imperialism*, of the existing empires of the capitalistic nations of Europe become crit-

icism of "imperialism" in general. Hobson's proposals for the extension of European control over the colonies by non-capitalistic governments, by the same token, become simply irrelevant to the problem of imperialism.

The fact that Lenin based his own *Imperialism* upon Hobson is also of considerable importance. Not only did he bring Hobson's work into the canon of Communism's sacred books, but he also imposed his interpretation of Hobson upon the bulk of the non-Communist scholars. Exactly why this should be so is somewhat mysterious, but a reading of the exigitical literature makes it clear that most students have read Hobson through spectacles provided by Lenin. In one respect, however, they seem to have failed to pay close attention to Lenin. In two sentences on page 91 of *Imperialism* Lenin criticizes Hobson's position on non-capitalistic empires. This very brief passage seems to have been overlooked by all of the scholars who have written in the field.

A second, and perhaps more important, cause of the prevailing misinterpretation of Hobson is a basic misunderstanding of the viewpoint of imperialists. It is apparently thought that an imperialist is simply someone who favors empires in general. If this is what "imperialist" means, there are substantially no real examples. Kipling was not in favor of empires in general; he was in favor of the British empire. To him the Russian and, later, the German empires were objects of intense suspicion and antagonism. In this he was typical—imperialists normally favor an empire built up by the nation or group with which they identify themselves while opposing similar empires built by nations or groups which they regard as enemies. One common justification used to explain annexations has always been the assertion that if "my" empire didn't take over, "Empire X" would seize the area, oppress the natives, and generally

do evil. Thus, the missionary John G. Paton, urging the annexation of the New Hebrides by England claimed: "The sympathy of the New Hebrides natives are all with Great Britain; hence, they long for British protection while they fear and hate the French, who appear to be eager to annex the group, because they have seen the way the French have treated the native races in New Caledonia, the Loyalty Islands, and other South Sea Islands."⁵

Thus the fact that Hobson attacked the empires of the capitalistic nations of his day cannot be used as evidence that he opposed empires in general, any more than Kipling's harsh words about the Russian empire proved that he opposed all empires. Hobson, of course, was opposed to the political and economic order existing in the states and empires of his day. Although not nominally a socialist, he had been greatly influenced by Marx and was deeply hostile to capitalism. Under the circumstances his opposition to the existing empires was understandable, but it was opposition to their capitalistic organization, not to the empires *per se*. The problem, as he saw it, was not to eliminate these empires, but to get them into the hands of people who could really be trusted to administer the affairs of the "lower races" for the "good of humanity." For this purpose he proposed to rely on "some organized representation of civilized humanity." (p. 232.) He never tells us what such an organization would be like, but it is clear that it would be so organized that Hobson could trust it. Empire controlled by the enemy (the capitalists) was bad, but empire run by people on the right side was good.

Another factor which may have led students to overlook Hobson's views on possible future empires (after the vicious capitalists had been disposed of) may be their location in his book. If one is reading a book which is "important" and one be-

comes bored, skipping to the last chapter or two is a standard practice. Hobson's *Imperialism* is far from the world's most interesting book, and it must be assumed that a good many of its readers, particularly students who have had it assigned, skipped over the part in which the chapter on the "Lower Races" occurs. The rather brief nature of the discussion of this point may also have been a contributing factor. The heavy emphasis on the capitalist empires of the real world and the relatively light treatment of possible "good" empires of the future is not, of course, surprising. In the Elizabethan age there was much more criticism of

the existing Spanish empire than speculation about the desirability of establishment of an English empire. This does not prove that the temper of the age was anti-imperialistic. Similarly, Hobson's concentration of attention on the evils of capitalist empires rather than on the benefits of a possible future empire run by men of good will merely reflects a concentration on current problems, not a basically anti-imperialistic temper. Hobson was anti-capitalist, but not anti-imperialist. His reputation as an opponent of imperialism arises primarily from failure to distinguish between these two positions.

¹Pp. 223-284. (The book has gone through several reprintings since its first appearance in 1902. My page references are to the 1938 Allen & Unwin edition.)

²Bernard Semmel has exhaustively, if not very penetratingly, catalogued the evidence on Fabian Imperialism in *Imperialism and Social Reform*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960). It is something of a shock to the modern reader to discover that the Webbs were active imperialists in the pre-war years.

³For a brief account of the principal schools of Marxist thought on imperialism during this period, see B. J. Hovde, "Socialist Theories of Imperialism Prior to the Great War," *Journal of Political Economy*, XXXVI (Oct. 1928).

⁴*Evolutionary Socialism* (New York, 1909), p. 179.

⁵*The Quest for a Principle of Authority in Europe, 1715-Present*, Mendenhall, Henning, and Foord, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1948) p. 289.

Notes from Abroad

It is late to begin, but something must be
said.

In a land of words that never penetrate
The alien hollows of my brain, some modest
Utterance is necessary to hinge
The world to being. Even if laughter has
No language, even if a woman saw
My hesitation and came toward me
On the street, her eyes appraising mine,
Some things must not be forgotten,
All the same. The shapes of words I know
Cry out for a living throat, a voice.
Silence is my final isolation—
The sound within my tomb. I'll not be dumb
Though all the scrambled syllables of Babel
Echo through the catacombs and rise
To deafen me with decibels of tongues.
I'll speak, and she will listen, though not a
line

Is indexed in her lexicon. For something
Must be said, though late, and I must not
Forget the shapes of words I know. The
hollows

Deepen: I must begin. The woman goes.

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