**Reading History: European Imperialism in the 19th Century**

[P.J. Marshall](http://www.historytoday.com/author/pj-marshall), 30 April 1982

[History Today](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/43)[Empire](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/237)[Volume: 32 Issue: 5](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/2792)

[Printer-friendly version](http://www.historytoday.com/print/2931)

P. J. Marshall looks at the historiography of 19th European Imperialism.

The very wide range of meanings attached to the word 'imperialism' have been explored by Richard Koebner and H.D. Schmidt in their *Imperialism. The Story and Significance of a Political Word* (Cambridge University Press, 1965). They show that the term entered popular debate in Britain in the late 1870s as a condemnation of what seemed to be abuses of British power outside Europe. Very quickly, however, those who believed in consolidating and expanding Britain's empire were willing to identify themselves as 'imperialists'. At the very end of the nineteenth century the concept was given a new twist when it was applied to the use of state power overseas at the behest of economic interests at home. What these economic interests were and how they operated were much debated in the early twentieth century, especially by writers who followed Karl Marx, the most famous of such contributions being Lenin's *Imperialism. the Highest Stage of Capitalism of 1916* . 'Monopoly finance capitalism', which inevitably preyed on the rest of the world, was Lenin's definition of imperialism. Later writers in the Marxist tradition have continued to use the term 'imperialism' to describe relations between what they see as the capitalist West and the rest of the world. Elsewhere use of the concept has rarely been precise; 'imperialism' has tended to become a term of abuse for any supposed domination which the speaker happens to dislike.

Some years ago there seemed to be a tendency for historians to abandon altogether so ideologically loaded and imprecise a term as imperialism. More recently, however, a consensus has perhaps emerged that, if not defined too rigidly, imperialism is still a valuable historical concept. Attempts to find substitutes for it have been unsuccessful. Imperialism can of course take many different forms, but their lowest common denominator in current usage would seem to be the exercise of power by one society over another. So unambitiously defined, imperialism is a phenomenon that can be found in almost all periods in the history of organised human societies. But there is widespread acceptance that the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the classical age of European imperialism. The reasons for this are not as self- evident as is sometimes assumed. The last quarter of the nineteenth century was certainly a period in which European power, in the very obvious forms of conquest and the creation of new empires, grew spectacularly. Most of Africa and large parts of South-east Asia were partitioned, while territory in the Pacific was incorporated into the European empires. Nearly all the major European states together with the United States of America were involved.

Yet in terms of peoples subjugated or square miles conquered, other periods, such as the sixteenth century for the Americas or the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for India, were at least as spectacular. If the exertion of European power is measured by other yardsticks than that of conquest, the last quarter of the nineteenth century may again look less pre-eminent in the history of imperialism. Nevertheless, there are good reasons why historians have concentrated so much of their interest on the years roughly from 1875 to 1900. In the first place, contemporaries were themselves acutely aware of the growth of Europe's power overseas. To them it seemed to have profound implications for Europe itself as well as for the societies engulfed by it. The questions raised by contemporaries have intrigued historians ever since. Much recent writing of real distinction is available in English, especially on imperialism in Africa. It makes an admirable starting point for anyone interested in imperialism in other periods.

When Europeans first started asking questions about why they were conquering large areas overseas in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they perhaps naturally tended to find the answers in Europe itself. Much of the early historiography of imperialism is now dismissed as both 'Eurocentric' and 'monocausal'. The crises affecting European economies, the diplomatic rivalries of the European powers, the chauvinistic nationalism of public opinions in Europe, were all advanced as the sole key to understanding imperialism. Much of the debate was in fact taken up by refutations of what were termed 'economic' explanations of imperialism. Lenin (somewhat misleadingly since he was not much concerned either with Africa or with the late nineteenth century) was set up as a target and then shot down by demonstrations that European businessmen took very little interest in the new conquests and in any case had hardly any capacity to influence the policies of the governments which brought about these conquests. Since the publication in 1961 of R.E..Robinson's and J.A. Gallagher's *Africa and the Victorians* . *The Official Mind of Imperialism* (Macmillan) historians have, however, largely abandoned both the search for a single explanation and the search for an explanation in Europe alone. 'Any theory of imperialism grounded on a single decisive cause is too simple for the complicated reality of the African partition', Robinson and Gallagher wrote. They saw British policy-makers balancing many considerations: economic prospects, diplomatic rivalry and public opinion. Above all, they saw all Europeans as reacting to what they called 'internal crises in Africa'. A briefer and even more trenchant statement of their view came in Chapter xxii of the *New Cambridge Modern History* , vol. xi *Material Progress and World-wide Problems 1870-98* , ed. F.H. Hinsley (Cambridge University Press, 1967): 'Scanning Europe for the causes, the theorists of imperialism have been looking for the answers in the wrong places. The crucial changes that set all working took place in Africa'.

Insistence that the partition of Africa owed much to Africans themselves reflects determined attempts by western historians, largely since 1945, to come to terms with the history of non-European peoples. The rest of the world were no longer to be regarded simply as victims of Europe. The kind of contacts which Europeans had been able to establish with Africa had depended on Africans. When conquest replaced the old pattern of contact, the explanation did not necessarily lie in a new European desire for territory for economic or any other kind of motive; it was likely that changes on the African side had disrupted the old connections compelling Europeans to create new ones by force. Growing awareness of the role of non-European peoples in the story of imperialism has also focused attention on those Europeans who had immediate dealings with them: 'men on the spot' in the tropics, settlers, traders, colonial officials, local military commanders and Christian missionaries. Local crises involving such people 'at the periphery', in the phrase of D.K. Fieldhouse (*Economics and Empire 1830-1914* , Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), may have had as much influence on the growth of empires as plans laid by governments in the European capitals. In his book Fieldhouse applies this theme to parts of Asia and the Pacific as well as to Africa.

Explanations of imperial expansion that concentrate solely on Europe or on one 'factor' on the European side are no longer fashionable. Yet there is still much room for debate about how the mixture of metropolitan or peripheral levels and of different impulses emanating from the European side is to be applied to particular cases. 'Economic' imperialism is, for instance, by no means dead, even if deterministic arguments about a decaying European capitalism being compelled to respond to depression at home by expansion into the tropics now have few adherents. But importance is given to the role of individual merchants and speculators, both in applying pressure on indigenous societies overseas and in lobbying their own governments. While the governments of the European powers were not necessarily easily manipulated by such lobbying, by the end of the nineteenth century they were increasingly willing to take action overseas which was intended to protect what were seen as national economic interests. The attitude of the British government in this respect has been analysed by D.C.M. Platt in an article entitled 'Economic Factors in British Policy during the "New Imperialism" in *Past and Present* xxxix, (1968). A new perspective on the relationship between imperial expansion and domestic public opinion has come from German historians' interest in the social roots of the pre-1914 Reich's foreign policy in general. For instance. H.U. Wehler has tried to link Bismarck's ventures outside Europe with attempts to ease tensions at home. A brief English version of this contentious thesis can be found with other valuable essays in Studies in the *Theory of Imperialism* , ed. R. Owen and R. Sutcliffe (Longman, 1972). In the fluctuating politics of Republican France a relatively small group of imperial enthusiasts appear to have succeeded by the 1890s in arousing much wider patriotic enthusiasm for empire. *French Colonialism 1871-1914: Myths and Realities* (Pall Mall Press, 1966) is a translation of a work by Henri Brunschwig, a leading French authority.

With so many variables to be considered, both on the European and on the non-European side, modern historians of imperialism tend to be somewhat wary of generalised accounts embracing the whole world. Africa so far has much the richest literature, but even here the tendency is for regional studies. A conspicuous example is the two volumes on West Africa so far produced by J.D. Hargreaves, *Prelude to the Partition of West Africa* (Macmillan, 1966) and *West Africa Partitioned* , vol. 1 *The Loaded Pause 1885-9* (Macmillan, 1974). G.N. Sanderson's essay 'The European Partition of Africa, Coincidence or Conjuncture' in *European Imperialism and the Partition of Africa* , ed. E.F. Penrose (Frank Cass, 1975) is a penetrating synthesis of recent research.

Studies on the late nineteenth-century expansion of the European empires are less abundant outside Africa. On the other hand, Europe's relations with much of Asia or with Latin America raise very interesting questions about forms of imperialism other than conquest. If imperialism is defined as the exercise of power, what constitutes power? Were Brazil or the Argentine, Turkey or China subjected to European imperialism in the nineteenth century? Some historians believe that what they call 'informal' empires were created long before the great extensions of European rule in the late nineteenth century and continued to exist throughout the century in areas not 'formally' conquered. Robinson and Gallagher in a famous article called 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' (reprinted with other articles on this theme in *Britain and the Colonies 1815-65* , ed. A.G.L. Shaw (Methuen, 1970) ) argued that relatively early in the nineteenth century British 'imperial- ism', defined as 'a sufficient political function... of integrating new regions into the expanding economy', was incorporating much of the world into what they call Britain's 'informal empire'. Others remain unconvinced, arguing that trade alone does not constitute imperialism. The exercise of power in a tangible political sense, such as by naval operations, treaties extracted under the threat of force or jurisdiction assumed by consuls, must be demonstrated if 'informal empire' is to have any meaning. D.C.M. Platt has persistently argued, as for instance in his *Finance, Trade and Politics in British Foreign Policy, 1815-1914* (Oxford University Press, 1968), that political coercion was not generally used in support of British trade until very late in the nineteenth century. He doubts the existence of a British informal empire. Concepts of informal empire are, however, of great interest to those who believe that imperialism without empires flourishes in the present-day world. In their view a capitalist world economy still holds sway over territory which Europe has ceased to rule directly. Such writers believe that this world economy, with its capacity to subjugate not just the economies but also the political and social systems of countries on Europe's 'periphery', came into existence long before the new empires of the late nineteenth century. Characteristic of this approach are Celso Furtado, trans. S. Macedo, *Economic Development of Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 1970) and F.V. Moulder, *Japan, China and the Modern World Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 1979). Thus the debate about nineteenth-century imperialism has much relevance to contemporary preoccupations. As in so much good historical writing, the past both illuminates the present and is illuminated by it.

* **Peter Marshall is the Rhodes Professor of Imperial History at King's College, London.**