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The Victorians: Empire and Race Transcript

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The Victorians: Empire and Race

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One of the most obvious and to the twenty-first century mind most ridiculous and annoying traits of the Victorians was their innate sense of the superiority of the British over the inhabitants of other countries. Their arrogance began close to home, indeed as soon as they set foot on the European Continent. Contemporary satirists were of course aware of this regrettable trait and features lampooning the arrogance of the English traveler, his lack of awareness of local customs and his failure to master foreign languages, were a regular feature in Punch magazine. (1) Contemplating the locals on a visit to the south of France in 1839, Thomas Arnold concluded: "The English are a greater people than these - more like, that is, one of the chosen people of history, who are appointed to do a great work for mankind." Charles Kingsley wrote in similar vein of "the glorious work which God seems to have laid on the English race, to replenish the earth and subdue it." Other European nations, especially the French, Italians and Spanish, were lazy and backward; or excitable and unstable. "The Anglo-Saxon Race", Matthew Arnold wrote in his commonplace book, reporting the landowner and politician Sir Charles Adderley addressing a group of Warwickshire farmers, "are the best breed in the world...The absence of a too enervating climate, too unclouded skies, and a too luxurious nature...has rendered us so superior to all the world."

In the eighteenth century the Grand Tour (2) had brought the younger generation of the nobility into contact with the ruins of ancient civilization in Italy, but this had the effect, among other things, of causing them to think how far the state of the country had declined since the days of the Roman Empire, inspiring among others the young Edward Gibbon to write his masterpiece *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Where the forum and the capitol had once stood, mused Gibbon (3), there were now only fragments. How and why had such a dramatic transformation of what was once the world's most powerful empire taken place? (4) The Grand Tour was an education not just in Classics but also in the current desolate state of the countries visited, and the evanescence of empire.

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars brought the Grand Tour to an end, but when peace was restored in 1815, it was soon replaced by the emergence of commercial tourism, catering to the newly rich middle classes and making use of technological innovations in travel such as the steamboat and, from the 1830s, the railway. The impression of decay and decline since the Ancient World was if possible however only strengthened by the new tourism, celebrated in paintings like Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, painted in 1836. (5)

The effect of travel was to confirm the Victorians' sense of superiority over other parts of Europe. As Britain industrialized, as British trade grew and expanded, as British towns and cities were gradually cleaned up in the 'sanitary revolution' of the mid-century decades, as Britain's countryside was criss-crossed with railway lines and metalled roads, British travelers began to feel they were stepping back in time when they stepped onto Continental soil. Inspired by Romantic ideals of the sublime and the picturesque, they went in search of wild natural landscapes like the Rhine gorge, and medieval ruins like the castles which adorned its heights, many of them indeed reconstructed, still as ruins, for the benefit of British tourists (here is a view of the Drachenfels by a British engraver, Thomas Sutherland, painted in 1820) (6). They often thought they found the Middle Ages alive and well and embodied in the Continent's inhabitants and their quaint customs. In 1846, a story in *Blackwood's Magazine* about a group of English travelers in Belgium described how one of its members, who thought that English cathedrals were "mere architectural monuments, half-deserted...[places] for meditating on past times and the middle ages" found in Brussels cathedral that "those past times...have come back again." (7)

The middle ages were present on the Continent not just in the form of picturesque ruins and ancient customs, but also in what British travelers saw as the dirty, smelly and unhygienic habits of its inhabitants. Landing at Calais in 1835, Frances Trollope was "much amused...at the answer made by an old traveler to a novice...making his first voyage. 'What a dreadful smell!' said the uninitiated stranger....'It is the smell of the continent, sir!' replied the man of experience." To mid-Victorians, indeed, even Germany, regarded by some as the home of poets and philosophers, inhabited by distant cousins of the Anglo-Saxon race, appeared mired in medieval backwardness. Germany appeared in British literature in the early 19th century as a Gothic land full of wild and untamed nature; its people could be brave and good-natured but also rough and unpredictable. In the mid-19th century, the English sense of superiority was if anything even more marked. Sarah Austin, who admired German intellectual life and translated some of the works of the great German historian Leopold von Ranke into English, thought in 1854 that in the German countryside 'we find a state of civilization which we have been accustomed to regard as past for ever...The more we go back to the recollections of what we heard in our childhood from our fathers, the nearer do we approach to the manners of Germany'.

Henry Mayhew, author of *London Labour and the London Poor*, a classic investigation of poverty and destitution, published a two-volume study of German Life and Manners as seen in Saxony at the Present Day, in 1864. (8) He too found the country extremely backward. 'Travelling southward from England', he wrote, 'is like going backward in time...In Germany we find the people, at the very least, a century behind us in all the

refinements of civilization and the social and domestic improvements of progress.' Germans in general were 'starving, cringing, swaggering' people who needed to learn civilized manners from the British, wrote Mayhew:

Heaven knows, we have seen poverty and wretchedness enough in our own land! – for years we made the study of it, and the investigation of all its phases, a special vocation...But we tell you, reader, we never saw such wretchedness, such squalor, such rude housing, such meanness in beggary, such utter want of truth and friendship in the terrible struggle to live, in the darkest dens, nor among the most luckless of the vagrants congregated in the British metropolis, as are to be found even in the families of the middle-class citizens of Saxony.

Germans spent the whole day 'in an offensive state of dirt and slovenliness', all the women of whatever class looked like charwomen, while 'the German serving-maid...is the very incarnation of everything that is loathsome to a person of the least refinement...She is the most dirty and slatternly trollop in appearance'. As for the German baby:

Such a sweet and grateful sight as an English baby, in long, free, white robes; with flesh as fresh and odorous as rose-leaves; with cheeks like apple-blossoms; with rolls of fat about its little neck; a pretty dimple at every joint; with hands and feet of the most exquisite chubby symmetry, and its tiny nails, like so many pinky little shells picked up by the seaside – is never to be seen throughout filthy, barbarous Deutschland...In Germany,...babies are loathsome, foetid things.

The Germans in general were stunted by malnutrition and inbreeding: 'Never was such a lantern-jawed, sallow-faced, hollow-eyed, herring-gutted, spindle-shanked, goiter-necked, sore-mouthed, sad-looking, half-clad, tatterdemalion race of people, as the working population of Saxony, seen in any other part of the civilized world.'

Mayhew's view of the Germans differed little from that of Gillray's scathing depiction of Germans eating sauerkraut in the early 1800s (9) though it was undeniably more comprehensively dismissive and incorporated, as Gillray did not, a strong feeling that the Germans were further back along the track of progress than the British were. Among other things, Mayhew memorably satirized the proliferation of titles and petty princelings in Germany:

Indeed, gadflies in summer never swarmed in such number about a dung-heap; nor vermin infested so profusely the rags of Irish beggars; such greedy animalcules were never seen in a magnified drop of dirty water; no insects at the time of a "great blight" ever covered the land so thickly, or ravaged it so thoroughly, as the horde of petty swaggering bogtrotter potentates in this miserable, under-fed, and over-taxed – ground-down and used-up – ill-conditioned and well-plucked – luckless, lifeless, spiritless, hopeless, and penniless – befuddled, beleaguered and benighted old Fatherland, or rather old Great-grandmother-land, of Germany.

Mayhew thought the Germans were corrupted by the all-pervasive rigidity of their social hierarchies: he hated 'their coarse compliments and servile obsequiousness...their bowing, smiling, fawning, and flattering to anyone who they fancy has the power to serve them, and their infamous detraction of the same person immediately they find there is nothing to be got out of him.' Thus 'lying, cheating, pilfering, bribing, spying, informing, sneaking, backbiting, bullying, toadying and every other low and dastardly species of iniquity, prevail on every side.'

The Germans were widely thought of as politically incompetent as well. In the 1850s, Sarah Austin criticized 'the corruption and ineptitude of the governing classes, and the servility and meanness of the governed' in Germany. The failure of the 1848 revolutions (shown here in a cartoon (10) illustrating the democrats being swept out of Germany) to unify the country or endow it with liberal institutions confirmed British disdain for the political abilities of the Germans. 'The mixture of violence and feebleness', wrote Sarah Austin shortly afterwards, 'of boundless pretensions and pitiable shortcomings, to which 1848 gave birth, showed but too clearly that the propensity to blind imitation, and the utter disdain of the Possible, which characterized Germany formerly, were not yet extinct.'

If these were the attitudes of early and mid-Victorians to the rest of the European Continent – and it would be possible to quote similar verdicts on the Spanish, the Russians, and Italians and many more – the sense of superiority they betrayed became even more marked when they came to contemplate the state of the rest of the world. At least Europeans were Christians, but the same could not be said of the inhabitants of most of the rest of the globe. For most of the nineteenth century, with the great exception of the Crimean War, Victorian Britain did its best to avoid entanglements and conflicts on the Continent of Europe; and if Continentals were regarded as backward and inferior, the hope expressed by many Victorians was that they were bound in the end to improve and modernize by their own efforts, and become, in effect, more like the British: liberal, industrialized, progressive, and clean. The same could be said of the largely self-governing colonies settled by British emigrants – Canada, Australia, New Zealand and to a lesser degree South Africa. But there was no such prospect in store for the Africans, or Indians who were plainly unable to improve themselves unaided, requiring the help or example of the British to bring them into the Christian fold and the modern world. During the Opium wars of the 1850, for instance, Richard Cobden's pro-Chinese sentiments were mercilessly satirized by those who thought the Chinese were violent and brutal, committing barbarous atrocities in the course of the Taiping rebellion in progress at the time (11).

An exception was made to this principle when Victorians contemplated the fate of the peoples they regarded as

the most 'primitive' in the empire, such as American South African bushmen or Australian aborigines. Doomed to virtual extinction, these races were widely seen as being simply too backward for rescue. This did not, however, amount to a justification of their extinction; on the contrary, their treatment by settler colonists was widely condemned, amidst severe censure of the brutal and unscrupulous Europeans who exploited and exterminated them. Dominant Victorian notions of racial and cultural superiority had a strong moral and religious content: the 'uncivilized' were human souls like any other, who deserved to be rescued and brought to eternal life through Christianity. Fundamentally, native Africans or Polynesians were regarded in much the same way as the French or the Germans; they lay some way back on the road to civilization but in time, like the British, they would get there.

Thus school textbooks in early and mid-Victorian times remind their young readers that two thousand years earlier Britain's inhabitants in the age of Boadicea (12) had been, as one book put it, 'nearly as low in the scale of humanity as her new colonists in after times found the aborigines of the New World:

All the Britons went without any clothing, except the skins of wild beasts thrown carelessly over them; and they painted their bodies of a sky-blue colour, in rude forms of flowers, trees, and animals. Instead of houses they had little mean huts; they tilled no ground, their food being game and fruits. Their arms were, a shield and a short spear to the lower end of the latter was fastened a bell of brass, in order to frighten their enemies, when they shook it.

History and geography textbooks pointed out that the Egypt of the pharaohs had been "full of ancient learning when Britain was inhabited by savages." Britain had eventually emerged from the Dark Ages, and there was hope therefore that Africa would one day cease to be the Dark Continent.

Thus textbooks in the early and mid-Victorian decades went out of their way to point out that backwardness in other cultures was a product not of lack of intelligence but of lack of progress and religion. The Wesleyan Juvenile Offering told its readers in 1844: "Our young readers have doubtless been led to believe that they are much more clever than the little Negroes of Africa and the West Indies and the inference tended to be drawn is, that therefore it is to very little purpose to collect and give, in order that those may be taught who are so dull and slow to learn." Thus the book went on to tell stories of how black teachers instructed by missionaries were successful in educating their peers. As the Juvenile Missionary Magazine told its "young friends" in 1866: "you see that man, through all his varieties, has a common parentage" and thus any human being of any race could "acquire the knowledge of reading and writing almost as speedily as Europeans". Underlying these views was the strong commitment to human equality embodied in the anti-slavery movement of the early part of the nineteenth century. (13)

Victorian Christianity held that all human beings were capable of salvation, and indeed held out the prospect of the ultimate conversion of the whole of humankind to Christianity. So missionaries were amongst the most celebrated and admired of Victorian heroes, foremost among them David Livingstone, who combined a passion for converting the heathen with a devotion to exploration, both equal sources of his fame back home. The major missionary societies were all founded in the 1790s to work among settlers, but their role in the anti-slavery campaign brought them to extend their efforts into indigenous societies, and throughout the century they were the main vehicle of education, literary and - as in Livingstone's case, for example - medical care. By the end of the century it was estimated that there were 10,000 British missionaries living abroad, in every part of the globe. Their presence had in practice little direct to contribute to empire, and indeed in the early decades of the missionary enterprise they were regarded with suspicion by British colonial authorities. Correspondingly, school textbooks - often as we've seen themselves produced by religious organizations - had little to say in the early part of the century about empire and went out of their way to give an optimistic view of the inhabitants of the world outside Europe.

Justifications for imperialism were not only religious but also political and historical, especially from mid-century onwards. The history of England had been one of the steady growth of freedom, in the dominant view of the day, and even towards the end of the Victorian era, intervention in other parts of the globe was justified in terms of liberation and progress. Time and again, school textbooks told children that Britain had been forced to intervene against oppression: "The Kingdom of Oude, which was under the rule of its own princes", one schoolbook declared in 1883, "was so badly governed that it was found necessary, in 1856, to add it to our possessions." Or The King of Ashanti, "such a tyrannical ruler that our Government felt it must interfere", as a 1903 book explained (14); everywhere, then the "white man's burden" was imposed on him by the universality of liberal principles and the impossibility of ignoring them if they were flouted, wherever in the world that might be. It was perhaps paradoxical to conquer part of the world in the name of freedom. This could even include the freedom of women, as Victorian writers waxed indignant about customs such as Chinese foot-binding and Hindu widow-burning. (15) But if the self-confidence of the Victorians in their own cultural superiority contained within it the seeds of imperialist interventionism, it also of course contained the germs of its own ultimate dissolution, as conquest had to be followed by education and the ultimate aim of building an educated, Christian, progressive and, in the end, self-governing indigenous society.

At times, of course, such optimism could be badly shaken, and at none more so than in 1857 in the so-called Indian Mutiny, when - among many other incidents - British civilians were massacred at Kanpur, an event on which journalists, writers and historians dwelt with almost as much relish as upon the "Black Hole of Calcutta"

when 127 British captives were suffocated to death in an Indian prison. One widely used textbook from the 1860s told its readers that during the Kanpur massacre: (16)

Shrieks were heard and low groans, and the sound of blows as the savages hewed to death the unresisting women and little children who filled the room. Thrice a hacked and blunted sabre was passed out, and a sharper one received in exchange. Next morning the mutilated bodies were dragged forth and cast into a huge well. When, two days later, the avenging English under Havelock reached Cawnpore, the blood of the victims still lay on the stone pavement of the hall; fragments of ladies' and children's dresses, soaked in blood, were scattered all around.

The savage British reprisals after the suppression of the rebellion, in which wholesale massacres of Indian civilians were accompanied by lining up Indian soldiers in front of cannon and blowing them to pieces, did not, of course, in the view of the British press, belong in the same category. (17)

The Indian Mutiny indeed inaugurated a period of reorientation in Victorian concepts of race and empire, culminating in the active public and propagandistic promotion of Empire and Imperialism from the 1870s onwards. The 1850s and 1860s administered a series of shocks to Britain's confidence in its international superiority and global mission. The shortcomings of the British military administration in the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, the failure of British forces to defeat the Maori in the New Zealand land wars, the stalemate of the second Ashanti War in West Africa, were bad enough, but they all paled into insignificance in comparison to the upheavals generated by Bismarck's wars of German unification, culminating in the foundation of the German empire in 1871, rightly seen as the conquest of the rest of Germany by the military state of Prussia, as in this cartoon of "The King of Prussia at Dinner" (18). As Disraeli, then Leader of the Opposition, remarked in the House of Commons:

This war represents the German revolution, a greater political event than the French revolution of last century... Not a single principle in the management of our foreign affairs, accepted by all statesmen for guidance up to six months ago, any longer exists. There is not a diplomatic tradition which has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope, at present involved in that obscurity incident to novelty in such affairs. We used to have discussions in this House about the balance of power. Lord Palmerston, eminently a practical man, trimmed the ship of State and shaped its policy with a view to preserve equilibrium in Europe. [. . .] The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England.

Britain needed in Disraeli's view to assert herself more vigorously on the world stage, and already in 1872, pursuing his mission of rallying the working classes, many of whom had been enfranchised on his initiative in the Reform Act of 1867, to the Conservative cause, he declared that they were "proud of belonging to an Imperial country, and are resolved to maintain, if they can, their empire." The need to divert working-class discontent into patriotic activity became even stronger with the sharp economic downturn in 1873.

Once he became Prime Minister, in 1874, Disraeli did all he could to bolster the British Empire at home and abroad. In 1875 he secured for Britain a controlling interest in the French-built Suez Canal, vital for communications with India. By the time his Premiership came to an end in 1880, he had mobilized British forces in Afghanistan and South Africa, and played a leading role in the Congress of Berlin, designed to settle the Russo-Turkish conflict of 1875-78. Above all, in 1876 Disraeli persuaded Queen Victoria to assume the title Empress of India - offering her, as in this cartoon rendition comparing him to the villain Abenazer from the pantomime Aladdin, a "new crown for an old one". (19) This was in fact motivated partly by his, and the royal family's belief that she should have a title that outranked those of the various subordinate monarchs in the Indian subcontinent, and indeed that of her daughter, also called Victoria, who was married to the German Crown Prince and would one day become German Empress.

Nevertheless, the move also signaled the growth of imperialist enthusiasm in the 1870s, creating an almost unstoppable momentum to the acquisition of new colonies in the 'scramble for Africa' in the following decade, a scramble which helped make the British Empire, shown in this hostile cartoon, the greatest the world had ever seen. (20) Even Disraeli's rival Gladstone, ever the reluctant imperialist, was forced to occupy Egypt and send General Gordon on his ill-fated expedition to the Sudan, and to continue the forward march of British imperialism in Afghanistan and South Africa, though with an almost equal lack of success there too. And imperialism was even better suited to win over the working classes, many of whom were enfranchised in the 1884 Reform Act; the demonstrations and disturbances in London in the mid-1880s, which included major riots in which shop windows in the West End were smashed by angry dockers, (21) underlined the need to substitute a new ideological cement for society in place of traditional habits of deference that clearly no longer had much influence. "The Empire", Cecil Rhodes was reported as saying in 1895, "...is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists."

Empire, Rhodes thought, would bring concrete economic benefits to Britain that would improve the lot of the masses. But it was also an instrument of patriotic propaganda. If children grew up in ignorance of it, warned the Liberal Prime Minister Lord Rosebery in 1892, the Empire was "doomed". Classrooms began to display the world map with the British Empire proudly coloured in red. (22) The new popular press played its part too. As the owner of the Daily Express proclaimed in 1900: "Our policy is patriotic; our faith is in the British empire." By this time, jingoistic enthusiasm for the Boer War was rife in London, and the empire was being celebrated in popular

stories by authors like G. A. Henty, (23) magazines like the Boys' Own Paper, and even in early films, one of which showed the bombardment of Mafeking, though it was actually shot on a Home Counties golf course. In his book *St George for England*, published in 1895, Henty declared that "the courage of our forefathers has created the greatest Empire in the world....if this empire is ever lost, it will be by the cowardice of their descendants."

Music-hall songs now celebrated the British Empire – "So join with me, all of you, while I sing Britannia's praise", went Winifred Hare's *Britannia's Sons shall Rule the World* in 1897, "The empire on whose shores the sun has cast no setting rays." Geography and history textbooks now emphasized the might and extent of the British empire, or, as Denham Harrison's music-hall ditty *Another Little Patch of Red* put it: (24)

For he meant to have a pull, did young John Bull,
He found it wouldn't do to lie a-bed;
And this plucky little chap
Soon began to paint the map
With an ever-growing patch of red.

History textbooks were rewritten in the 1880s and 1890s to give more space to the Empire, and criticism of dubious enterprises such as the Chinese Opium Wars (25) or shady characters like the corrupt Indian administrator Warren Hastings now virtually disappeared. Along with all this went cheap, mass-produced prints and reproductions of imperial scenes, most popularly George Joy's *Gordon's Last Stand*, (26) as well as biscuit-tins, cigarette cards (27) and many other items of imperialist kitsch such as "empire plates". (28) Schools began to celebrate "Empire Day", marked by a parade through the centre of London, or here, in 1908, in Hartlepool, (29), as indeed in almost all other towns and cities across the United Kingdom, while organizations like the Boy Scouts were formed to raise a new generation for military service in the colonies. (30) By the eve of the First World War, Empire was a central part of British national identity in a way that it had not been in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The new attitude to Empire contained a strong element of racism and the denigration of other cultures and civilizations. Schoolbooks now dismissed oriental culture as ornamental rather than useful, and told their readers of monuments like the Taj Mahal that "it might be supposed that they had originally been erected to commemorate the virtues of some great benefactor of our species, instead of being the whim of some prince who dawdled away his years in indolence or pleasure." (31) Different races were no longer depicted as equal in the sight of God, sharing a common humanity, if at an earlier stage of historical development than that of the Victorian Englishman. Instead, as Bernard Porter has noted, they now emphasized racial difference and the alleged racial inferiority of subject peoples: "The Australian natives are an ugly, unprepossessing people, with degrading and filthy habits", as one geography textbook put it: "Like beasts of prey...the Malays are always on the watch, to assuage their thirst of blood and plunder"; "The tribes [of Nigeria] ... are extremely savage, practicing horrible forms of religion, accompanied by human sacrifices." In such circumstances, it now seemed to be agreed, rule by the British was morally justifiable as well as politically necessary.

The British, indeed, were, in the view of the imperialists of the 1880s and 1890s, destined not only to rule inferior races but also to lead the entire world into the future. In popular culture, magazines like Henty's *Union Jack* portrayed battles and conflicts in which the plucky British invariably overcame larger numbers of racially inferior natives. (32) As Joseph Chamberlain declared in 1895: "I believe in this race, the greatest governing race the world has ever seen; in this Anglo-Saxon race, so proud, tenacious, self-confident and determined, this race which neither climate nor change can degenerate, which will infallibly be the predominant force of future history and universal civilization." The emphasis on race was relatively new. Belief in racial hierarchies based on descent had become more widespread once it had become possible to lend it scientific legitimacy. This was not least a product of the growing influence of Darwinism in the second half of the century. In the hands of Herbert Spencer, (33) who coined the phrase "the survival of the fittest", Darwinism became a harsher creed of competition, and phrases such as "the struggle for existence" and "the strongest prevail" soon became part of what has been termed "social Darwinism", the application of Darwin's ideas, or a version of them, to human society.

In the world-view of Darwin's son-in-law Francis Galton, who already began to apply Darwinian principles to human society in the 1860s, genius was the product of heredity, and by breeding the clever with the clever it would be possible to improve the intelligence of humankind. The prime example of course was his own family and its various connections, in which brilliance and scientific ability occurred in successive generations with notable regularity; Galton, wavering between designating himself as scientifically able or generally brilliant, opted in the end for the latter. (34) Of course, like other eugenicists, he didn't pause to consider whether wealth, education and circumstances played a role as well.

Conversely, Galton thought that the inferior were threatening the future of the race by producing too many sub-standard children. In the 1880s and 1890s, with the extension of the franchise and the growing organizational self-assertion of labour, fears of working-class insubordination grew, and what Galton termed "eugenics", the idea of degeneracy or reverse evolution began to be discussed, as the beginnings of the welfare state made the conditions of life less challenging and less complex, or the function in life of the mass of ordinary people became simpler. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this view could be found in H. G. Wells's 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, (35) where the time traveler discovers in the distant future that the working classes have degenerated into the

“Morlocks”, a race of subterranean savages, while the middle and upper classes, the “Eloi”, have lost almost all their sense of self-preservation and competition and have no capacity to organize or defend themselves against the depredations of the cannibalistic Morlocks.

Social Darwinism became even more pessimistic in the hands of Galton’s disciple Karl Pearson, seen here with the aged Galton. (36) Pearson rejected the view that racial characteristics could be educated into or out of human beings. “No degenerate and feeble stock”, he wrote, “will ever be converted into healthy and sound stock by the accumulated effects of education, good laws, and sanitary surroundings. Such means may render the individual members of a stock passable if not strong members of society, but the same process will have to be gone through again and again with their offspring, and this in ever-widening circles, if the stock, owing to the conditions in which society has placed it, is able to increase its numbers.” The remedy for eugenicists such as Pearson was to encourage the breeding of superior humans, and discourage the increase of inferiors. While this might be possible within British society, the same principles were much less encouraging when applied to the world as a whole.

Here Pearson was influenced by the French racial theorist Arthur de Gobineau, whose ideas were first developed in his treatise *On the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853-5). Gobineau, a pro-German whose enthusiasm for the aristocracy was so great that he awarded himself the title of “Count” to stake his own claim to noble status, argued that interbreeding could only dilute the characteristics of superior races, rather than improve those of inferior ones. (37) Gobineau did not win many adherents in France for his claim that the French aristocracy was mostly German or, as he put it, borrowing from earlier theorists such as Friedrich Schlegel and Ernest Renan, “Aryan” in origin, until after France’s defeat by Germany in the war of 1870-71, which soon sparked a debate about the extent to which the Germans’ victory had proved them to be racially superior. Not surprisingly, Gobineau’s ideas were most popular of all in Germany, where a Gobineau Society was founded in 1894). Taken to fresh extremes by the composer Richard Wagner’s son-in-law, the Englishman Houston Stewart Chamberlain, in his 1899 book *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, they became the vehicle of a racialized antisemitism, in which the Jew was portrayed as the eternal enemy of the pure-bred Aryan, and Jesus Christ, the founder of modern Christianity, was an Aryan and not a Jew. (38)

Gobineau’s pessimistic denunciation of racial mixing, which represented in his case an attempt to denounce the levelling consequences of social change in Europe, had major consequences when applied by Pearson and others to the wider world. Scientific, or better put, pseudo-scientific racism arranged racial types on an evolutionary scale (39) and implied that mixing them together would pull what were now increasingly known as the “higher races” down to the level of the “lower” ones. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s 1913 story *The Poison Belt* indeed had the “lower races” succumbing first of all to the effects of a gas cloud hitting the Earth from space, with the British of course holding out to the last; and then the races waking up in reverse order when the cloud, revealed as only temporary in its effects, finally passes. (40)

Contemplating the British Empire and its history, Pearson declared:
History shows me one way, and one way only, in which a high state of civilization has been produced, namely, the struggle of race with race, and the survival of the physically and mentally fitter race. If you want to know whether the lower races of man can evolve a higher type, I fear the only course is to leave them to fight it out among themselves, and even then the struggle for existence between individual and individual, between tribe and tribe, may not be supported by that physical selection due to a particular climate on which probably so much of the Aryan’s success depended.

In this pessimistic view, education and improvement were futile when applied to inferior races. But these views did not go unchallenged. Racism and eugenics were stronger in other countries, for example in Germany, before the First World War than they were in Britain; laws banning racial intermarriage were for example introduced in German South-West Africa, now Namibia, and served as a model for the later Nuremberg Laws introduced in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. The genocidal suppression of the Herero uprising in South-West Africa (39) had no parallel in the British administration of the Empire, and when cruelties and atrocities did occur, they ran into heavy criticism at home. Racism did not fit in well with the continuing liberal emphasis on English and indeed world history as the story of the growth of liberty, and there was a distinct strand in imperialism that emphasized the role of liberty, education and improvement in Britain’s rule over her colonies, something that allegedly made British imperialism superior to its counterparts in other countries, for example, Germany. In the administration of the Empire, race could often take second place to the need to reward the native elites whose collaboration was essential to the maintenance of imperial control, and British royal honours, knighthoods and orders were doled out liberally to maharajahs and sultans across the colonies; here for example is His Highness Maharaja Thakore Shri Sir Dr. Bhagvatsingh Sahib, Maharaja Thakore Sahib of Gondal, photographed in 1913 (42).

In addition, Critics of Empire like J. A. Hobson emerged to excoriate the economic exploitation they thought underpinned the colonial enterprise. Britain may have enjoyed its imperial High Noon in the decades leading up to the First World War, but it was not unclouded, and in some quarters there was a consciousness too that the Empire, like others in previous ages, might not last: expressed at its most eloquent in Kipling’s *Recessional*, written for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897: “The tumult and the shouting dies...The Captains and the Kings depart...Far-called our navies melt away...On dune and headland sinks the fire...Lo, all our pomp of yesterday’s one with Nineveh and Tyre!” (43)

It was not only Kipling who realized that empires rose and fell. How and why this happens, or at least, how and why it happened in the modern era, when empire became a central aspect not just of Victorian but also of European consciousness and experience, will be the subject of my third and final series of Gresham Lectures, beginning in September.

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