

New imperialism of the end of 19th century history essay



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Imperialism is a contested concept characterised by ‘ problems of definition, methodology and ideology.’ Cohen describes imperialism as an ‘ international relationship characterised by a particular asymmetry, of dominance and power. In a broad sense imperialism refers to the expansion of the political sovereignty of one nation over foreign lands and new imperialism refers to imperialism between 1870 and 1914. This was when European economic, political and social imperial policy, became increasingly formalised in Africa. There are several interpretations of imperialism, and the term “ New imperialism” is equally debated.

There are four main interpretations of new imperialism; firstly the diplomatic, political explanation of colonial motives, juxtaposed to the second economic account of imperialism. Linked to the traditional understandings of new imperialism is the third interpretation which focuses on the metropolitan origins of colonial rule. This is in contrast to the view that imperial expansion originated in the periphery. There is clearly an overlap between all the explanations of imperialism and this analysis of new imperialism will aim to highlight their connections. Robinson and Gallagher also make the connection with post-colonial theory, as a critique of new imperialist interpretation and these ideas will be explored.[3]In order to maintain the focus of evaluation and to contextualise examples, this analysis will focus on new imperialism in Africa in particular and more specifically in Southern Africa. This essay will critically analyse how the four main interpretations of imperial rule; diplomatic, economic, metropolitan and peripheral, apply to the view of new imperialism during the end of the nineteenth century.

According to the diplomatic interpretation, at the end of the nineteenth century, colonialism was arguably motivated by European political rivalry. The progression towards formal colonisation was triggered by European competition for international power and prestige. Before 1884 imperialism was informal economic influence, however in order to secure economic interests European states needed political control. Thus European competition from 1880's onwards increased reaching its peak in 1884's scramble for Africa at the Berlin conference. Darwin considers the role of diplomacy pointing out that 'the alliance system in Europe grew more rigid,' at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly in the context of new European powers such as Germany.[4]

Consistent with the diplomatic perspective, Germany's unification in 1871 and growing industrial economy posed a threat to Britain and France's international prestige and amplified European rivalries. In Southern Africa Britain aware of international competition, annexed Egypt in 1914 and imposed formal colonial rule in order to secure the economic interests of Britain in the Suez Canal. This change to formalised diplomatic imperialism can be seen as a new imperialism, when the transfer of European rivalries extended to the rest of the world. Hayes emphasises this point commenting that new imperialism that 'cut-throat international competition came to be accepted as the inevitable concomitants of the system.'[5]

However, although new imperialism's tense European competition was debatably evident during the new escalation of European rivalries it can be argued that this was not a new characteristic of imperialism. From a diplomatic standpoint, European political competition for power and prestige <https://assignbuster.com/new-imperialism-of-the-end-of-19th-century-history-essay/>

had existed since the Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648) between the Bourbon and the Hapsburg empires. Although the competition during the Thirty Years War was not strictly imperial, the diplomatic argument emphasises the fact that colonialism was motivated by this competition for superpower status before the end of the nineteenth century. Wright points out that European powers ‘behaved in a fashion which kept them perpetually involved in diplomatic crises with each other,’ emphasising the fact that European rivalry was not a new feature of international relations or imperialism.[6] Thus it can be said new imperialism was the extension of European rivalries into colonial territory and political competition was not a new feature of colonialism.

In Southern Africa, political competition for prestige was evident between British, Portuguese and Dutch (Boer) traders. The Cape Colony was set up in 1795, to formalise British economic interest in the region and the Orange Free State and Transvaal were established to secure Boer interests. All these colonies[7] were founded before the turn of the twentieth century, and colonial land was ‘viewed as mere pawns in international diplomacy.’[8] Furthermore European competition apparent in the scramble for Africa was diplomatic and not a militaristic, but ‘gentleman’s capitalism.’ This supports the idea that new imperialism was not new but described the transfer of European rivalries into colonial land and it can be said that it was in fact the intensification of imperial rule.

In contrast to the diplomatic analysis of imperial rule the economic explanation identifies the key motive of imperialism as international economic competition. Before the end of the nineteenth century the <https://assignbuster.com/new-imperialism-of-the-end-of-19th-century-history-essay/>

capitalist integration of African societies was evident in Southern Africa since 1544 when Portuguese merchants began trading in Delagoa Bay. At the beginning of the twentieth century economic imperialism debatably took a new character aiming to actively secure free trade, through conditional free trade treaties which Hobson described as ‘ aggressive imperialism.’[9]From an economic perspective informal rule was preferable to formal new imperialism because it was more financially sustainable. Nonetheless formal colonial rule was needed to secure economic supremacy in colonial territory. Hobson points out that this is similar to the diplomatic view of colonialism noting that ‘ the leading characteristic of modern imperialism, the competition of rival empires, is the product of the same period.’[10]Lenin, with a Marxist outlook views imperialism as economically motivated, describing it as ‘ the monopoly stage of capitalism.’[11]The economic explanation of empire suggests that formalised new imperialism was a natural progression. However it should be noted that the economic expansion of European markets was not a direct result of the industrialisation of Europe. In fact during the 1870’s when ‘ new imperialism is said to have started, America and European states were experiencing an economic depression, comparable to the 1930’s depression.[12]

Although the economic understanding of imperialism during the beginning of the twentieth century recognises the fast pace of imperialist activity, economic change was not a new trait of imperialism. Trading in Africa had existed since before the sixteenth century and in West Africa the Royal African Company had thrived from the slave trade since the seventeenth century. In Southern Africa capitalist trade had grown since the Dutch East

India Company had settled in 1721. Wright supports this point noting that Southern African markets were 'the smallest, least progressive, and most fluctuating in quantity.' [13] This suggests that an increase in imperial economic activity was not a new feature of colonialism. Thus although the protection of free trade was a new British, French and German economic policy, it cannot be said to constitute a new type of imperialism. Instead this period can be seen as the intensification of imperialism, because unregulated trade had been going on in the Southern African region for centuries. Darwin highlights the connection between the diplomatic and economic understandings of colonialism commenting that 'European economic activity in the extra-European world was bound to invoke diplomatic intervention and great power reaction.' [14] The diplomatic and economic explanations of the motives for imperialism recognise the new competitive attributes of colonialism during the end of the nineteenth century. Both also can be said to describe a continuity of colonial rule that is not distinctly new but the amplification of imperialism.

Alongside the economic and diplomatic interpretations, the third explanation for the origins of imperialism is the idea that metropolitan factors shaped colonialism. At the end of the nineteenth century the 'new' imperialism was arguably stimulated by the financial ruling classes in Britain who increased their foreign investment in Southern Africa where gold and diamond deposits were found. Cain and Hopkins point out that 'the Banks themselves were the most powerful single influence,' [15] and new imperialism was a progression from the informal 'expansion of financial power [in a] world-wide 'invisible' empire,' to formal power. [16] Hobson points out that new imperialism had

been 'good business for certain classes and trades,' which explains why at the end of the nineteenth century migration to the profitable regions in Southern Africa increased.[17]At the beginning of the twentieth century colonialism took on a new financial focus disputably a change in attitudes towards empire, when foreign investors wanted to ensure political stability in order to maintain economic supremacy. The metropolitan explanation of empire thus shows that the diplomatic and economic interpretations of new imperialism are compatible.

Although the new imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century from a metropolitan perspective represented a movement towards formalised rule to protect foreign investment, it can be said that new aspects of colonial rule were the augmentation of former imperial practices. Cain and Hopkins' understanding of new imperialism places significant emphasis on investment interests of the wealthy classes; however it is important to take into account the fact that colonialism was not always profitable for a nation or ruling elite. This was particularly true in Africa where British investment was concentrated in America and New Zealand. Despite the fact that there was an increase in foreign investment during the end of the nineteenth century, overseas investment was still less than in dominions such as Australia and Canada.[18]Dumett supports this fact and points out that 'metropolitan interests were still focusing on profits and power.'[19]The fact that South African investment in the Cape colony had increased steadily to secure the trading route to India and then in the form of international businesses shows that there is greater continuity of colonial rule before 1870. This supports the

idea that new imperialism was not in fact new but was the magnification of existing imperial influence.

Opposed to the metropolitan analysis of imperialism is the idea that the origins of colonialism can be found in peripheral imperial territory. According to the peripheral explanation individual pursuits gave European states a reason to enforce formalised colonialism, and this is what characterised new imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century. In line with the economic interpretation of colonialism the peripheral perspective acknowledges the 'pro-imperialist pressures for colonial expansion and consolidation derived, not only from London, but also increasingly from mining companies.' [20] In South Africa the discovery of valuable gold and diamonds meant that periphery territory became very valuable which Robinson and Gallagher explain was 'indirectly connected with economic integration.' [21] It is important to note that although during the end of the nineteenth century the industrialisation of Europe took place, this commercial growth did not mean that formal colonialism was inevitable. The peripheral understanding of new imperialism focuses on the role of companies and individuals in colonies such as Cecil Rhodes and his De Beers Mining Company. At the beginning of the twentieth century in South Africa Rhodes had informal authority over colonial policy and he went on to takeover other territory in Southern Africa, founding Rhodesia in 1895.

In contrast to Lenin's economic explanation, Robinson and Gallagher portray the new imperialism as the protection of national interests commenting that 'the scramble for Africa as painful but unavoidable.' [22] It appears that new

imperialism during the end of the nineteenth century was the formal
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annexation of foreign land. However Britain had established colonial dominions in Canada and Australia, highlighting the fact that new imperialism was not limited to Africa and Asia. Therefore how can new imperialism be essentially new at the end of the nineteenth century? The fact that the Cape Colony was founded in 1652 stresses the fact that new imperialism cannot be viewed as a truly new form of colonialism.

Furthermore in West Africa, the Portuguese and later the British having traded slaves since the fifteenth century only sought formalised rule in 1902. Thus it can be said that despite the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century colonial policy took on a new formalised nature, it can be argued that new imperialism according to the peripheral view of colonialism was alternatively the persistent increase and amplification of colonial rule.

This analysis of new imperialism has mainly focused on the macro-political and economic explanations, however it is important to mention that there is a sociological aspect of new imperialism which Schumpeter explores.

Imperialism during the end of the nineteenth century was linked to the idea of a 'civilising mission' bringing civilisation to backward Africans who Salisbury regards 'as poorly equipped for political survival or material progress.'^[23]This followed the European idea of progress, and formal new imperialism meant that African societies had a new white foreign authority. However in practice the social structure in African society remained the same in order to maintain social and economic stability. The direct authority was still that of a tribal chief. The indirect rule of European colonialists therefore did not affect African people in a significant way until cheap forced

labour was introduced. This form of new imperialism in reality had no new characteristics but a further development towards intensified colonialism.

It is also important to consider that this was in the context of popular social Darwinist theories that served to justify formalised colonial government.

While acknowledging that social Darwinism was a new ideology that shaped racial segregation and political policy, it can also be seen as the extension of exploitation. Hobson maintains this argument observing that it 'drove every continental nation to consume an ever growing share of its material and human resources.' [24] The idea that new imperialism is connected to scientific Darwinism shows that in practice imperial rule purely intensified the mistreatment of Africans under the belief that European states were bringing civilisation.

Having considered and weighed up the diplomatic, economic, metropolitan and peripheral explanations of new imperialism it can be concluded colonialism during this period was not truly a new variety of imperialism.

From a post-colonial standpoint the concept of new imperialism is Eurocentric, representing the colonial outlook and emphasising European agency and dominance. Viewing new imperialism as the magnification of informal imperialism to colonial is the most convincing interpretation of this period as it highlights the continuity and cyclical nature of imperial rule. The term 'new imperialism' can therefore be said to be useful merely for highlighting the increasingly exploitative nature of colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nonetheless the impact of imperialism within these understandings is complex and the different interpretations of colonialism represent the opinions of historians over a hundred years. Therefore theories seeking to explain imperialism can only capture the truth to an extent. Cohen mentions the complexity of what is known as new imperialism commenting that ‘ there do seem to have been some elements of continuity as well as discontinuity in the nineteenth-century imperial behaviour.’[25]Just as the move towards formal colonisation, whether intentional or not, during the end of the nineteenth century can be seen as new imperialism, a comparison to neo-imperialism of the United States and China in twenty-first century can be made. Harvey comments that ‘ New imperialism’ appears as nothing more than the revisiting of the old, though in a different place and time.’[26]Decolonisation was debatably the return to a cyclical pattern of informal and formalised imperialism, arguably what existed before the end of the nineteenth century, and is still present in the twenty-first century.