

## Debating the origins of modern Western imperialism

Political thinkers and historians have been divided about the motives behind the drive for empire in the late nineteenth century ever since this wave of expansion took place. Various competing explanations exist. One idea that can be seen in the works of William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism* (New York, 1951) and A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (Oxford, 1954) is that imperialism was an inevitable consequence of the tensions that were building up in Europe during that period, and that imperialist expansion became a zero-sum game, in which one country's strategic gain was inevitably another's loss. Linked to this is the argument that colonialism can be seen as a reflection of the belief in the late nineteenth century that the possession of empire was a symbol of Great Power status. However, such interpretations raise serious problems. For example, if strategic imperatives and prestige were so important, why did this great wave of expansion not provoke a war? After all, scholars of the origins of the First World War largely agree that the reasons for this conflict lay in Europe, not in competition in Africa.

In contrast to the explanations that dwell on strategy and prestige, a number of contemporary critics of empire, such as J. A. Hobson and V. I. Lenin, argued that imperialism was caused by economic factors, such as the desire to capture new markets for trade and investment. This theory has been countered by the observation that industrialists stood to gain far more from markets in Europe, the United States and Latin America than from Africa, thus demonstrating that the argument that imperialism is a product of capitalism is a chimera. However, in recent years Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins have forcefully restated the case for economic factors, at least in Britain's case. In their book *British Imperialism 1688–2000* (London, 2002), Cain and Hopkins argue that British imperialism came about to serve the interests of a 'gentlemanly capitalist' elite that dominated both the City of London and Whitehall, and that it consisted of both a formal empire, that is the possession of colonies, and an informal empire, in other words economic spheres of influence. This is at first glance a persuasive argument, but, once one begins to think about the anomalies, it raises as many questions as it solves, particularly again in the case of Africa.

Another interpretation of imperialism, which has been put forward by, among others, Ronald Robinson (1972) and David Fieldhouse (1973), is that far too much stress has been put on decision-making in Europe rather than on events on the periphery. They have emphasized in their work on informal and formal empire that the shift towards formal control was often as a result of local factors and the interactions between indigenous elites and European communities. While this view has some validity, it also fails to provide a complete explanation, for if peripheral problems were the main

cause of expansion, why is it that they all occurred around the same time in the late nineteenth century? Surely the only answer to this lies in the rising European pressure on these societies, which then takes us back to looking at European economic and strategic motives.

As with most areas of study, all these arguments have some elements of truth in them, and thus it is wise to conclude in the end that strategic, economic and local factors were important. However, it is also vital not to overlook the fact that the military technology and administrative innovations of late-nineteenth-century Europe provided the imperialists with a marked superiority over those they sought to conquer. Nor should one ignore the fact that the idea of a 'civilizing mission', as exemplified by the evangelical Christianity of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries, provided an ideological justification for imperial gain. The drive for empire was therefore a complicated process, and to attempt to describe it by referring to a mono-causal explanation is to fail to do it justice.