

A Man of his Time: the Scientific and Political Grounds for Kipling's Imperialism

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In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Empire expansion and imperial policies seemed to offer the ideal solution for Britain's recent loss of leadership in the world market and for its subsequent crisis of confidence. Such a reality contrasted with the former period of British prosperity, which had surfaced in the fabulous fifties and pervaded the country for two decades. Now poverty and anxiety escalated and the precarious situation of the lower class called for intervention by the State, whose activity progressively increased after the 1880s and was accompanied by the emergence of collectivism, which was politically and ideologically opposed to individualism.

It was also in the context of the Industrial Revolution that new theories on evolution emerged. Mainly due to Darwin's contribution, these theories played an extremely important part in the intellectual debate of the age, also having a profound impact on liberalism and the vindication of imperial expansion at the turn of the twentieth century. The response to such theories was not linear, though, as they gave rise to contradictory reactions. On the one hand, since they revealed that humankind was subjected to natural selection in the process of struggle for existence, social Darwinists and eugenicists defended that rivalry and competition were necessary for the improvement of the human race and for the elimination of the "unfit", whose fate should not be interfered with. This idea contrasted sharply with the liberal defence of social reform and State intervention as a way of promoting access to equal opportunities and providing the most vulnerable with the necessary assistance to engage in fair social dynamics. On the other hand, since the new theories on evolution underlined the interdependence of different organisms in the natural world, other groups, namely the new liberals, resorted to them in order to promote ideas of cooperation and mutuality.

Therefore, while, on the one hand, the Industrial Revolution exposed human fragility in a context of rapid social and economic change, thus making the need for social reform pressing, on the other hand, the new theories on evolution promoted the idea that only the fittest could survive in a context of social evolution and progress. Such theories gained an increased popularity in the last decades of the nineteenth century after the publication of Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871). Thirty years after Darwin expressed his theories on the evolution of men, Wallace, while acknowledging that the large majority of naturalists had been converted to believe in the existence of natural selection due to "indirect proof", he would nevertheless state that it was "late in the day to deny its [natural selection's] existence without adducing some adequate and proved substitute" (306). Hence, the application of the "survival of the fittest" thesis to society was opposed to the needs of those who had been left in a more fragile situation by the process of industrialisation. Such a thesis held that the weakest should not be provided with assistance since, if they were unable to survive in the context of strife, then they should be left to their fate, as helping them would not only be useless, but would also contribute to the deterioration of the human race and represent an impediment to progress.

With the need to regain economic prosperity, then, imperialism entered upon a new phase and, initially, the ties established with South Africa seemed to provide a solution for Britain's loss of international leadership. Moreover, such ties were, in general, apparently accepted and morally sanctioned, since it was believed that Britain had a civilising duty towards the populations of the tropics. Back in the 1870s, Benjamin Disraeli's foreign policy had been recurrently criticised by liberals and commonly compared to the regime of Napoleon III and, consequently, to authoritarian practices, Empire expansion and military aggrandisement. Imperialism was, therefore, not widely welcomed (Koebner and Schmidt 147-148). Yet, a decade later, notwithstanding the international economic situation and the colonial rivalry, the new imperialism was characterised by a racial and nationalist element, which made it widely appealing and praised due to its liberal, nationalistic and democratic discourse.

In fact, the expansion of the Empire and the wars which accompanied it, especially the second Boer War, as well as a number of imperial campaigns, seemed to attract widespread public interest and, despite the fact that the

various views and debates on the Empire were controversial and differed enormously, the general feeling was that imperial expansion might achieve the objective of working towards the spread of civilisation. Besides the promotion of the “imperial sentiment” in schools, there were several initiatives which either celebrated imperialism or supported the instigation of an imperial sentiment, promoted, to a large extent, by imperial propagandist agencies, whose influence was relevant, comprehensive and undeniably present in different areas of society, rather than by the government (James 184, 202-203; Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire* 2, 11; *Imperialism and Popular Culture* 10). Mackenzie, for example, regretted the fact that popular imperialism tended to be associated with jingoism and therefore with aggressive, offensive and xenophobic attitudes, but he nevertheless stated that the former was widespread and should not be so narrowly defined.

In fact, Koebner and Schmidt (196, 204-205, 216-220, 243) had already stressed the broad popular appeal of imperialism in the late 1880s and 1890s. They noted that the economic reasons behind the incorporation of South Africa into the imperial idea and the conflict between the European powers over the acquisition of the tropical Empire were generally overlooked and the spirit of the civilising mission proclaimed instead. This new conception of imperialism and the respectability of its mission were to reach its peak in 1898. The British Empire and the new kind of expansionism associated with it was then regarded as a just and beneficent one, with a very clear moral obligation to fulfil.

Bernard Porter (*Critics of Empire* 36-40, 326, 330-332), too, acknowledged the “rise of Empire sentiment” in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. A “more shouting” tone characterised this new phase of imperialism, which now included the tropics besides the white dominions. However, jingoism, intrinsically associated with the new imperialism, notwithstanding its “noisy features”, its arrogance and its disregard for the rights of Africans, somehow seemed to become more popular due to the resistance of those who feared it as an anticipation of greater evils, such as chauvinism, the worship of war and social Darwinism. For Porter, left-wing speculation about, resistance to, and condemnation of, imperialism actually transformed it into a much more serious movement than it actually was. According to this perspective, anti-imperialist reactions were therefore stimulated by the fear of what jingoism might be hiding,

rather than by its practical implications, which were not as serious as many were predicting. Nevertheless, even though movements on the left might not have been directly responsible for the eventual emancipation of the British Empire, they certainly had some influence on nationalist movements.

The imperial enthusiasm was soon to be shattered in the wake of the controversies over the Boer War, which shook the nation's confidence in the moral character of the new imperialism, split the British in their attitude towards the Empire and earned the country a general condemnation by Europeans, who associated imperialism with an inflated and arrogant form of English nationalism.

It was precisely during the Second Boer War that Rudyard Kipling, who was not only taken over by the imperial sentiment but also substantially contributed for its promotion, played a particularly relevant role as a publicist of Empire and imperial expansion. After having given a number of pro-Boer speeches, Kipling travelled to South Africa in 1900 and was in charge of the production of a newspaper for the British troops, entitled *The Friend*, whose intention was that of promoting a sense of national identity and lift the spirits of the British soldiers (Hamer). However, a year before that he had already published his famous "A White Man's Burden" and also "Absent Minded Beggar". "A White Man's Burden", which Kipling sent to Theodore Roosevelt, then Governor of New York, in the context of the Spanish-American War, clearly expressed the apparent duality of imperialism. On the one hand, the expression of its moral duty and philanthropic nature and objectives towards the colonies, which the following verses express:

Go, bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives need;
Fill full the mouth of Famine,
And bid the sickness cease.

On the other, the assumption that the natives, referred to as "captives" and "half devil and half child" were in a backward state of development and therefore needed the guidance of a superior race, "the best ye breed", to emancipate them from darkness. However, the success of imperialism would not necessarily be guaranteed, as we can infer from these verses:

And when the goal is nearest
 (the end for others sought)
 Watch sloth and heathen folly
 Bring all your hopes to nought.

Anyway, “The White Man’s Burden” was and still is generally interpreted as a vindication of imperialism, its civilising mission and the “burden” that it represented to the ones undertaking it.

“An Absent-Minded Beggar” was meant to be used for fundraising to help the families of the soldiers fighting in the Boer War. It was first published in the imperialist *Daily Mail* and therefore aimed at instilling people’s sympathy towards both the British mission in South Africa and the bravery of the British soldiers, who, in most cases, had left their comfortable lives to fight for their country. In fact, during the war, Kipling wrote about the fragile financial situation these were left in and about the difficulties the soldiers had to go through upon returning to civilian life, since many of them had to leave their lives, families and permanent employment, which resulted in a considerable cut in their income, with no guarantee that they would have their positions assured when they returned (Hamer). The “Absent Minded Beggar” was recited in theatres and Music Halls before the shows and embodied a whole “imperial feeling”. It was an immediate success. The intention was clear. That of appealing to people’s sense of duty towards those who had sacrificed their lives for the greater good of the country:

When you’ve shouted “Rule Britannia”: when you’ve sung
 “God Save the Queen”
 When you’ve finished killing Kruger with your mouth:
 Will you kindly drop a shilling in my little tambourine
 For a gentleman in khaki ordered South?
 He’s an absent-minded beggar and his weaknesses are great:
 (...)
 Pass the hat for your credit’s sake, and pay — pay — pay!

(...)
 There are families by the thousands, far too proud to beg or
 speak:
 (...)

‘Cause the man that earned the wage is ordered out.
 He’s an absent-minded beggar, but he heard his country’s call,
 And his reg’ment didn’t need to send to find him;
 He chucked his job and joined it — so the task before us all
 Is to help the home that Tommy’s left behind him!
 (...)

 Pass the hat for your credit’s sake, and pay — pay — pay!

Let us manage so as later we can look him in the face,
 And tell him what he’d very much prefer:
 That, while he saved the Empire his employer saved his place,
 And his mates (that’s you and me) looked out for her.
 He’s an absent-minded beggar, and he may forget it all,
 But we do not want his kiddies to remind him
 That we sent ‘em to the workhouse while their daddy
 hammered Paul,
 So we’ll help the homes that Tommy’s left behind him!
 (...)

 Pass the hat for your credit’s sake, and pay — pay — pay!

At the beginning of the twentieth century, then, and in Ivan Hannaford’s words: “The principles of political philosophy that had once guided human affairs were now replaced by the principles of natural selection and the processes of social evolution set in an ideological frame of reference” (325). The ideological frame of reference was related to the needs, results and ambitions of imperialism, whereas the interpretation of the principles of natural selection and the processes of social evolution dictated that the world was composed of a hierarchy of races with Europeans at the top and all others below (Horowitz, 1996).

Even though there had always been critical voices both of Empire and imperial expansion, at the beginning of the twentieth century the Empire’s pride suffered a definite setback and there was a growing belief that imperial expansion was morally wrong and had to be reversed, which made imperialists change their attitudes and consequently develop new approaches to imperialism and colonial government. Therefore, the apologists of imperial expansion justified the “Scramble for Africa” with the argument of necessity and also with the statement of a sense of duty and responsibility towards the natives. In fact, Joseph Chamberlain stated that:

Here [in possessions other than self-governed colonies] also the sense of possession has given place to a different sentiment — the sense of obligation. We now feel that our rule over these territories can only be justified if we can show that it adds to the happiness and prosperity of the people, and I maintain that our rule does, and has, brought security and peace and comparative prosperity to countries that never knew these blessings before. (213)

However, despite the apparent philanthropic concerns of the new imperialism, influential imperialists such as Joseph Chamberlain believed that the survival of the British Empire implied national efficiency, as the objective was that of transforming Britain into a proper imperial nation, and the British into an undisputed governing race (Porter, *The Lion's Share* 133-139; *Critics of Empire* 2-3). The connection established between efficiency and Empire by the liberal imperialists, whose leader was Rosebery, was in part due to their belief in the superiority of certain models of conduct, namely those of Japan and Germany. Owing to the decline in the birth-rate and the increasingly evident physical unfitnes, Germany proposed new measures of military reorganisation, social welfare and education, based on the need for eugenic improvement. A growing interest in German historical thought actually contributed to the discarding of the utilitarian doctrines of the early nineteenth century, which maintained that men and women were basically alike at all times (Hoppen 473). Nevertheless, a belief in the superiority of the British race was undoubtedly also fostered by the theories propounded by social Darwinism, which seemed to scientifically sanction the belief in the existence of superior races. These same races then believed that their imagined superiority justified their authority over those who found themselves at a less developed stage of civilisation.

Despite their attempts to keep the imperial sentiment alive, the democratic, civilising and respectable tone that accompanied the discourse of the new imperialists was discredited by the Boer War, which shook people's confidence in the moral character of the new imperialism. In fact, with the advent of the new imperialism, the notion of the struggle for existence between individuals came to be applied to the relationship between nations and races, and, at the turn of the century, the coincidence of the popularity of evolutionary theories with the scramble for Africa gave rise to so-called scientific racism.

The Liberal Party led by Campbell-Bannerman was the main opposition group to the imperialist Unionist government of the late 1890s. Yet, Liberals tended either to ignore important problems or to deal with them inefficiently, there was no agreement within the party, and, despite the fact that they attacked imperial policies, they did so without any conviction or coherence. However, Campbell-Bannerman was a strong opponent of the Boer War and actually referred to the practices of the British soldiers in South Africa such as the burning of farms and crops and the creation of concentration camps for Boer women and children as “methods of barbarism”, an expression which further generated turbulence and fierce discussion between imperialists and liberals.

In fact, if it is true that Britain emerged from the “Scramble for Africa” with the most substantial gains, as Goodlad (29-30) suggested, it is also evident that its victory in the Second Boer War owed little to military expertise and was made possible as a result of hotly contested practices. As a consequence, the enthusiastic jingoism that had previously characterised the popular attitude towards imperialism soon waned and anti-imperialism grew (Porter, *The Lion’s Share* 177-178). However, Kipling’s imperial sentiment did not wane. In 1906 Campbell-Bannerman established a Liberal government of which “the prophet of British imperialism in its expansionist phase” to use Orwell’s words, was highly critical. In fact, he had always been suspicious of Democracy and a vigorous critic of the Liberals who opposed imperialism.

I have argued that the Industrial Revolution eventually revealed its devastating impact on society; that the decline of laissez-faire and individualism represented a blow for liberal ideology; that collectivism and the apology of increased State action to mitigate the negative consequences of the prevailing system seemed to represent a viable alternative. In this context, the new theories on evolution, in all their complexity, were used by both individualists and collectivists, among others, who strove for the scientific sanctioning of their proposals. Such theories, though, also seemed to contradict the need for social reform, especially as far as providing the weakest with assistance was concerned, as that would represent an impediment to progress.

Externally, the “survival of the fittest” thesis would be applied to the relationship between races and communities, so as to prove that some were

superior and others inferior. This belief came to characterise the new imperialism which initially seemed to be of a philanthropic nature. In fact, Kipling himself seemed to defend a philanthropic kind of imperialism, as David Cody notes:

(...) its purpose (of the British Empire) was to maintain stability, order, and peace amongst the heathen, to relieve famine, provide medical assistance, to abolish slavery, to construct the physical and the psychological groundwork for "civilization", and to protect the mother country. It was an island of security in a chaotic world.

Nevertheless, assumptions about the value of the different races and the role of the most civilised ones in the process of evolution and progress definitely characterized imperialism, or imperialism(s). Even that of an eminently philanthropic nature.

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Abstract

Rudyard Kipling was, as George Orwell noted, “the prophet of British Imperialism in its expansionist phase”. In fact, and as can be anticipated from the title, rather than analysing Kipling’s theories and proposals, it is my intention in this article to address some of the most relevant discussions in the field of science and politics at the time, namely as far as imperialism and the biological theory of society are concerned. These often intersected and offer us an enlightening backdrop for understanding Kipling’s own visions of Empire and imperialism.

KEYWORDS

Kipling; politics; science; Imperialism; biological theory of society

RESUMO

Rudyard Kipling foi, segundo George Orwell, “the prophet of British Imperialism in its expansionist phase”. Na verdade, e como pode deduzir-se pelo título, não é objectivo deste artigo não analisar as teorias e propostas de Kipling, mas antes abordar alguns dos debates mais relevantes no domínio da ciência e da política no período em questão, nomeadamente em relação ao imperialismo e à teoria biológica da sociedade. A intersecção entre estes dois domínios era frequente e oferece uma contextualização pertinente e esclarecedora para um melhor entendimento das visões de Kipling sobre o Império e imperialismo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Kipling; política; ciência; Imperialismo; teoria biológica da sociedade
