

What can historians learn from the study of past empires and imperialism?

There is a question at the core of the study of imperialism, whose supposed answers have fundamentally affected the worldviews of millions or even billions. Answering it, much can be learned from the history of empire. This question is simple: Why? Why did the nations of Europe, particularly Western Europe, come to achieve such insurmountable supremacy over the globe by the end of the 19th century, dominating every other continent and each of the great empires on them, and leaving countless lasting legacies in today's world? Historians have offered two hypotheses in answer to this question. The first is geographical, that the ecology of Europe enabled its technological progression, and that expansionism naturally followed from such an advantage. The second is social, that the political and economic systems Europe came to develop gave it both a stronger impetus for technological progress and for expansionism. The answers provided by these hypotheses reveal the drivers of successful imperialism, a vital key to understanding events all throughout history.

The oldest and most widely expressed answer to this question of imperialism is one of racial supremacy: any 19th century scholar would without hesitation answer that the reason for Europe's technological advantage over the world's other continents was the white man's inherent superiority. However, 19th century Europeans were not the first to posit such ideas, supposed inherent superiority has long been used by imperial powers to explain their dominance and, crucially, to justify their actions, a valuable lesson of imperialism. The archetypal example of 19th century European attitudes can be seen in Cecil Rhodes' famous declaration that "we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race" [1] or American Colonel John Chivington's remark: "I [...] believe it is right and honourable to use any means under God's heaven to kill [American] Indians" [2]. Both of these quotes reflect the same sentiment, that white racial superiority over indigenous peoples justifies absolutely any action undertaken against them; there could

be no more perfect tool to justify imperialism. These sentiments are not new, the 11th century Persian scholar Avicenna believed that “pale-skinned Europeans were ignorant and lacked discernment” and “dark-skinned Africans were fickle and foolish” [3], and these races were therefore appropriate for slavery. Such sentiments justified the Arab slave trade that would last for almost 900 years, and foreshadows the future actions, and theories used to justify them, of exactly those “pale-skinned Europeans” once the tides of history had turned to their favour. However, Avicenna never suggested any inherent biological inferiority, but rather that the “extremes of climate” of Africa and Europe led to the development of barbaric cultural traits. Such a view is similar to that of the Romans, who saw the *cultures* of ‘barbarian’ peoples as inferior, but viewed culturally assimilated members of these groups as equal to other Romans. For example, the 4th century Roman General Stilicho, who married the niece of the emperor and was for a time one of Rome’s most powerful men, was the son of a Vandal father. [4] The notion of a half-African or half-Indian man attaining any even remotely comparable position in the British Empire, however thoroughly Anglicised, is by contrast inconceivable. The Europeans of the age of imperialism were not the first conquerors to use supposed supremacy to explain their success, but they were the first to give it pseudo-scientific biological basis, a grim reflection of the age of enlightenment which coincides with the age of imperialism. This teaches us that racial prejudice is a modern phenomenon and should not be treated as an inevitability of human behaviour, but equally that broader supremacist arguments have always been used as tools of imperialism itself and should be discounted as legitimate explanations of the rise and fall of empires.

The most successful imperial conquest in history was the European colonisation of the Americas; a hemisphere of cultures were not merely subjugated, but replaced by European settlers who left a hemisphere of European derived cultures and states in their wake. In comparing the ecology of the world’s continents and their impacts on the growth of civilisations, historians can understand the reasons for this success, and how ecology affects empire more broadly. Eurasia’s greatest advantage was its domesticable animals: horses,

cattle, sheep, pigs and goats are all native to Eurasia, there are no equivalents to any of these in Africa, Australia or North America. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Livestock led to greater food production, and therefore the growth of larger cities, and the use of livestock to carry supplies (and in the case of horses, soldiers) over long distances allowed for the spread of armies and, therefore, of empire. Indeed, the one exception to this trend is the single domesticable animal boasted by the Americas: the llama of South America, arguably is the reason why South America produced the Inca Empire, the greatest of the civilisations of pre-Columbian America, occupying a territory of approximately 2,000,000 km² at its height - 9 times larger than the empire of their Aztec counterparts in Mesoamerica [5]. Livestock also gave the Europeans a hidden weapon upon their arrival in the Americas: disease. Close proximity to livestock in dense urban areas led to the transmission of countless deadly zoonoses in Eurasia. For example, measles evolved from a disease which infects cattle. When the Europeans landed in America and Australia, up to 90% of the population are estimated to have been killed by these diseases - far more than fatalities from European guns [6]. This was what allowed America to be settled by white Europeans (and their African slaves). Eurasian diseases, brought about by Eurasian livestock, are the foremost reason why Europe's imperialism in America was so successful that the entire Western Hemisphere was not merely conquered, but irreversibly brought into the sociocultural fold of what we now call the West. To quote geographer and historian Jared Diamond "[The] very unequal distribution of wild ancestral species [of livestock] became an important reason why Eurasians [...] were the ones to end up with guns, germs and steel." [7] However, notice that Diamond is careful not to write of Europeans but only of Eurasians; the geographical argument is an imprecise hypothesis that can only confidently be applied to Eurasia as a whole. Furthermore, this hypothesis does not explain why technological advantage necessarily leads to imperialist expansion. A more granular social argument is necessary to understand why it was Eurasia's westernmost corner that developed the most advanced military technology, and the strongest incentives to spread its empires across the globe.

The social hypothesis of Europe's triumph suggests that the competition between European states catalysed continuous technological development and provided the impetus for imperial expansion, therefore suggesting capitalism to be inherent in the imperialism of the early modern era. An apt example of this is the cannon: although made using Chinese-invented gunpowder and first used by the Ottomans against the walls of Constantinople, both of these powers enjoyed unmatched domination in their respective regions and had no pressing incentive to advance the technology. In Europe, by contrast, not only were the many powers of Europe in constant competition with one another to field the most effective armies, but numerous *condottieri* (mercenary companies) were in competition to receive the most lucrative contracts, resulting in an arms race producing ever more effective weapons. Historian Paul Kennedy summarises this contrast, arguing that "it [was] only in Europe that the impetus existed for constant improvements" [8]. Political decentralisation did not just have military consequences, Kennedy argues that this permitted the growth of a class of burghers, leading to policies that prioritised the domination of trade routes and markets, and therefore expansionism. In Ming China, the growth of a merchant class was suppressed through the confiscation of property and banning of individual businesses both in order to centralise economic control and enforce the Confucian condemnation of the unnecessary accumulation of wealth. [9] The other non-European powers, such as Japan, the Mughal Empire and the aforementioned Ottomans exhibited similar trends in this period. In decentralised Europe, by contrast, no one government had the ability to so completely stunt such an economic development, as the burghers could always relocate to another more amicable state. Consequently, Portugal's establishment of outposts across Africa's coast and Columbus' voyage across the Atlantic, the dawn of the age of imperialism, were after all both motivated by a desire to find lucrative trade routes to the Orient which circumvented Ottoman tariffs. Indeed, this argument of capitalistic competition is precisely the reason for European imperialism offered by colonised peoples themselves, albeit in much harsher rendering. The 20th century Bengali philosopher Rabindrath Tagore believed that, to quote Pankaj Mishra, "their modern civilization [was] built

upon the cult of money and power.”[10] It was Europe’s division, therefore, that incentivised its continuous technological progress, and the interests of its mercantile class that gave continuous impetus for expansion, which can be seen either as economic development or materialistic greed; these are the fundamental ingredients of empire.

In seeking to understand the history of imperialism, there are many lessons to be learned. The simplistic supremacist arguments most often used to explain it are in truth tools of imperialism itself, and it is vital to separate these ideas from reality. The layered hypotheses of modern historical scholarship reveal ecological favour as an enormous factor in the creation of successful imperialisms throughout all of history, and all but ensured Eurasian success over other continents. However, the specifically European-forged world we live in was never guaranteed, but a consequence of the division and warring between European states, in a sense exactly the ‘barbarism’ the Europeans believed they were remedying, which should perhaps prompt us to wonder whether Tagore was right in saying “Their modern civilisation [...] is inherently destructive, and needs to be tempered by the [...] wisdom of the East.”[11]

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