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The Imperialist Reason: Evolution of Self-Described Knowledge and Morality

Imperialism has existed under many different names and for a variety of purposes from the colonization of the “New World” to the contemporary spread of American freedom in the Middle East. Imperialism has grown new faces to accommodate changing world sentiments and evolved to better suit national values. Yet, the underlying establishment on which imperialism survives and flourishes remains fundamentally the same. While imperialism utilizes specific instruments for the oppression and aggressive governing of other peoples, it also requires the approval and encouragement from the citizens at home in order to succeed. Particularly, the intellect and conscience of the imperialist nation need to be convinced of the imperialist cause. In essence, people support imperialism from behind an illusion of concrete “knowledge” and justifying “morality”. Specifically, the old imperialism of the nineteenth (and part of the twentieth) century was made possible behind the knowledge of scientific racism, as studied in Matthew Jacobson’s *Barbarian Virtues*, and selfless humanity, as expressed by Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden”. In my paper, I intend to highlight how Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* exposes and dismisses the imperialist reason investigated by Jacobson and exercised by Kipling. It is important to note that Jacobson explores the knowledge of imperialism from an outside, academic perspective, whereas Kipling actually participates in the old imperialist reason. Achebe illustrates two types of white conquerors: an anthropological Commissioner and the preaching missionaries. The characters represent the intellectual and moral justifications of imperialism presented by Jacobson and Kipling, respectively. Published in the 1950s during the height of

African anti-colonial liberation struggles, *Things Fall Apart* dispels the legitimacy of these old imperialist illusions. Achebe's novel corresponds to the emergence of new global ideas and principles. However, although the reality offered in Achebe's novel destroys the reason that defended old imperialism, imperialism does not die out. Instead, new intellectual and ethical explanations are adopted to better suit the imperialist nation's ever-changing values and principles. Michael Ignatieff, professor of Human Rights at Harvard and prominent voice on U.S. international affairs, signals the latest imperialist reason, the redefined "knowledge" and the amended "morality". Thus, a new imperialist age is born and the exercise of power continues.

In order for imperialism to be possible, the imperialist nation needs to present and accept two self-declared absolutes: 1) a basis of knowledge and 2) the reassurance of morality. "Knowledge" refers to the engineered truths that provide a foundation of intellectual assumptions on which imperialism can act. "Morality" signifies the self-declared good will and selflessness, which legitimizes imperialism for the nation's conscience. Both elements are vital to the domestic support of an imperialist nation. First, I aim to illuminate the old imperialist version of these requirements as described and embodied by Jacobson and Kipling, respectively. Second, I plan to demonstrate how Achebe's novel marks the expiration of old imperialist reasoning. Finally, I propose that a new imperialist mindset—knowledge in democracy and morality as the source of freedom—emerges to replace the outdated one.

Although a century lies between the writing of Jacobson and Kipling, the ideas presented in their works collaborate to illuminate the intellectual precepts of the old imperialist reason. Jacobson examines the "objectivity" of scientific racism as a foundation on which Kipling's self-convincing righteousness is based. Together, these versions of knowledge and morality justify old imperialism. Jacobson, a professor of American Studies and History, explains that assumptions of knowledge "provided a narrative for otherwise disparate and disjointed images of the world's

nations and tribes, and it tacitly endorsed a very particular set of political and social relationships” (Jacobson 141). The establishment of knowledge contributes to a narrative, or lens, through which the imperialist nation viewed the world. Mirroring Michel Foucault’s idea of the power and knowledge relationship, this illusion of scientific knowledge allowed for the power relationships of imperialism (Foucault 27). Specifically, Jacobson organizes old imperialist knowledge into three different realms of science: evolution, genetics, and measurable intelligence. Each of these sections declares certain “truths” that lent to the establishment of racial hierarchy and the subsequent exercise of imperialist power: 1) human races were “objectively ordered” based on technological and educational ranking, with “lower” societies corresponding to “earlier” stages of human development (145); 2) genetic study ranked the world’s people according to physical and behavioral traits, coding the “lower” races as “irretrievable biological chaos” threatening to the “higher” races (163); 3) “scientific measures of intelligence” determined a race’s capacity to self-govern, and “lower” peoples were mentally unqualified for democracy and would fare better under guiding colonization (163). As Jacobson points out, “empires themselves made use of anthropological or ethnographic ‘knowledge’” as a seemingly objective starting point for their imperialist rationalization. Under this self-created illusion of ultimate truth, imperialist reason eliminated any possibility of subjective judgment or error. Knowledge as objective certainty justifies imperialism from an external, “factual” and unbiased source. Thus, the scientific assumptions as evidence for a legitimate imperialist cause were especially convincing. This knowledge concluded that, as indicated by the three pieces of scientific “evidence”, lower, non-white peoples lacked the development, genetic gifts, and mental capacities for self-governance and progress. Based on this evaluation, the superior white nations “might step in to make better use of the unimproved ‘waste spaces’ that the savage occupied but no way possessed” (Jacobson 172). The “scientific” argument indicating racial inequity and, in turn, calling for a need for the

intervention of the superior races, was very appealing to the imperialist intellect. The seemingly concrete reality of scientific racism made the need for imperialism nearly unquestionable.

Although the certainty of knowledge was enough to establish a *need* for imperialism, this intellectual appeal did not fully validate specific imperialist *proceedings*. An ethical justification is necessary persuade the imperialist conscience into action.

A similar appeal must be made to the imperialist conscience in order to defend the nobleness of its cause and dispel any suspicions of bullying, aggressive actions. While this ethical establishment is grounded in the veracity of knowledge, it legitimizes imperialism from a different angle. Written to convince the isolationist United States to expand its influence in the Philippine island colonies, Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden" exemplifies the moral-based argument of old imperialism. He hints at the foundation of knowledge on which he bases his ethical appeal. Essentially, the knowledge is the scientific racism described by Jacobson. Kipling refers to the non-white societies as being "half-devil and half-child" (Kipling 7-8). This description coincides with the claim in Jacobson's book that the "savages" demonstrate a substandard intellectual capacity (like that of a child), which prevents them from achieving self-government and democracy. The moral argument that Kipling makes in the rest of his poem depends on this fundamental assumption—taking this knowledge as unquestioned fact.

Ultimately, Kipling declares that since the white man practices imperialism despite its exacting and unrewarding burden, then imperialism must be morally noble and altruistic. Specifically, his imperialist rationalization is three-fold: fruitlessness, sacrifice, and ingratitude. According to Kipling, the white man works "to seek another's profit/ and work another's gain" (15-16). These lines suggest the "profit" gained by the "savages" is the development and civilization that the imperialists instill on their land. As Kipling points out, imperialism is "no tawdry rule of kings,/ But toil of serf and sweeper"; the white man gets nothing in return for his hard work and

commitment to the savage cause (26-27). In fact, the white man even philanthropically sacrifices his well-being and comfort for the betterment of the “sullen people” (7). Kipling suggests that the imperialists gallantly forgo life to help the lower race as he proclaims, “go mark them with your living, / and mark them with your dead” (31-32). Kipling’s final point is that, despite the “blame of those ye better” and “through all the thankless years”, imperialists still persist in their dignified quest regardless of ingratitude or criticism (35, 54). Kipling argues that since imperialism continues to operate, despite expense, sacrifice, and ingratitude, then imperialists must be acting selflessly and righteously. He offers a very compelling ethical justification for imperialist action. The two illusions of scientific knowledge and selfless humanity complete the old imperialist reason. The white man continually adjusts his versions of self-described knowledge and morality in order to construct a suitable veil of reasoning through which imperialism may be justified.

The old imperialist reason examined by Jacobson and upheld by Kipling survived through the colonization of Southeast Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. But, eventually, new global sentiments and ideologies emerged that undermined the enduring versions of knowledge and morality. For the most part, modern imperialists no longer accept the notions of scientific racism and “The White Man’s Burden” to be accurate representations of its justified cause. Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* invalidates the old imperialist reason. In his story, Achebe illustrates the customs and lifestyle of a particular Ibo tribe in Africa. The turning point of the novel occurs when this isolated culture is overrun by British imperialists. Specifically, the Commissioner and missionaries personify the respective knowledge and morality of old imperialism. By revealing the flaws in the mentality of these characters, Achebe exposes the failure of the old imperialist illusion. The Commissioner’s scientific approach to understanding Ibo culture is confirmed at the end of the novel when the Commissioner thinks about the book he plans to write and name *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Niger*. Much like the

technical outlook on race described by Jacobson, the Commissioner views the Ibo people as being evolutionary and scientifically undeveloped. However, this perspective of the African culture is dismantled by Achebe's illustrative novel. Through out the book, Achebe describes the law and tradition of the Ibo culture, from the different forms of punishment to the diversity of ceremonies and celebrations. Achebe's insight into the reality of Ibo culture challenges the assumptions of scientific racism reflected in the Commissioner. The "knowledge" on which the Commissioner bases his judgment of Africa is undermined. Achebe shows that Africa is not made of unsophisticated, developmentally delayed cultures, but rather African tribes practice a specific form of government and organization. In a similar way, the missionaries mirror the moral justification underlying Kipling's poem. Like Kipling, the missionaries view their presence in the tribe to be altruistic. One of the missionaries, Reverend James Smith, sees the world "as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness" (Achebe 184). Smith's perspective echoes Kipling's description of "the savage wars of peace" (Kipling 18) where the White Man fights to civilize the "half-devil" primitive tribes. However, Achebe's story also contests this narrow-minded interpretation of African morality. In describing the oracle, sacrifices, and ceremonies of the tribe, Achebe reveals the existence of a complex religion and outlook on virtue. The "morality" which serves as justification for the missionaries and Kipling is invalidated. Rather than civilizing the Ibo tribe, the White Man merely presents his competing version of morality. Ultimately, the publication of *Things Fall Apart* indicates the historical end of the old imperialist reason and the need for new justifications to fill the void.

While the old imperialist reason has expired, imperialism still continues using the same method of asserting "knowledge" and "morality" as justification. Though, the content of the "knowledge" and "morality" are different, or more precisely, modernized. A new imperialist

reason is woven into the ideas of contemporary writer Michel Ignatieff's articles. In his 2003 article "The Burden" published in the *New York Times Magazine*, Ignatieff states:

The old European imperialism justified itself as a mission to civilize, to prepare tribes and so-called lesser breeds in the habits of self-discipline necessary for the exercise of self rule. Self rule did not necessarily have to happen soon...In the new imperialism, this promise of self-rule cannot be kept so distant, for local elites are all creations of modern nationalism, and modern nationalism's primary ethical content is self-determination (6).

Ignatieff indicates that the emergence of modern nationalistic ideologies (not prevalent in the age of old imperialism) demand an adjustment in imperialism's approach. Specifically, Ignatieff focuses on the role the U.S. plays in the new international arena. In a more recent article, he insists that America is "the last country with a mission, a mandate and a dream, as old as its founders. All of this may be dangerous, even delusional, but it is also unavoidable. It is impossible to think of the U.S. without these properties of self-belief" (47). Ignatieff's statement suggests that the U.S. justifies its international policies, specifically those in the Middle East, under the illusion of a new imperialist reason. Although America still grounds its policies in centuries-old ideologies, it has adopted another version of "knowledge" and "morality"—of absoluteness—to defend modern imperialism. Ignatieff writes:

America has inherited this crisis of self-determination from the empires of the past. Its solution—to create democracy in Iraq...is both noble and dangerous: noble because, if successful, it will finally give these peoples the self-determination they vainly fought for against empires of the past; dangerous because if it fails, there will be nobody left to blame but the Americans (7).

Interlaced into this passage are traces of a new imperialist reason: the assuming "knowledge" of democracy that the U.S. claims to epitomize and the "morality" of possibly sacrificing reputation

for the purpose of spreading freedom. The scientific racism described by Jacobson and the sacrifice-for-development expressed by Kipling have been replaced by methodical self-determination and nobleness of guiding democracy. America asserts its expertise in the precise construction of global democracy, while at the same time vocalizing the great risk it holds in taking on a leadership position. The science of democracy and the integrity of being a world mentor allude to the content of a new “knowledge” and “morality”. Thus, while Ignatieff does not offer the specific imperialist justifications described by Jacobson and embodied in Kipling, he essentially participates in the similar method of employing “knowledge” and “morality” for legitimizing imperialism. America is the new empire and has defined the latest imperialist reason.

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