

Imperialism: A French Viewpoint 1891

The following extract from the (1891) book of Paul Leroy Beaulieu on 19th-century colonization illustrates perspectives from the time on colonization.

It is impossible not to consider imperialism as one of the tasks imposed on the civilized states for the last four centuries, more particularly in our own age.

The present-day world is composed of four different parts in terms of types of civilization. That of Western civilization - our own part. A second part [is] inhabited by people of a different civilization, but organized in compact, coherent and stable societies and destined by their history and present character to govern themselves - the Chinese and Japanese peoples for example. In the third part live peoples advanced enough in some respects, but ones which either stagnated or had not been able to constitute themselves as unified, peaceful, progressive nations, following a regular development.... India ... before the British conquest, Java, and the Indochinese peninsula represent particularly this third type.

Finally, a great part of the world is inhabited by barbarian tribes or savages, some given over to wars without end and to brutal customs, and others knowing so little of the arts and being so little accustomed to work and to invention that they do not know how to exploit their land and its natural riches. They live in little groups, impoverished and scattered, in enormous territories which could nourish vast numbers of people with ease.

This state of the world implies for the civilized people a right of intervention ... in the affairs of the peoples of the last two categories.

It is neither natural nor just for the civilized people of the West to be cooped up indefinitely and jammed into the restricted spaces which were their first home. Nor is it natural and just that they there accumulate the marvels of science, the arts and civilization, that they see the rate of interest fall more each day for lack of good investment opportunities, while they leave perhaps half the world to little groups of ignorant, ineffectual men who are like feeble children . . . or to exhausted populations, without energy, without direction, who may be compared to old men . . .

Imperialism is often confused with commerce or with the opening of commercial markets.... Imperialism means something quite different from the sale or purchase of commodities. It entails a profound action on a people and a territory, providing the

inhabitants with some education and regular justice, teaching them the division of labour and the uses of capital when they are ignorant of these things. It opens an area not only to the merchandise of the mother country, but to its capital and its savings, to its engineers, to its overseers, to its emigrants. . . . Such a transformation of a barbarian country cannot be accomplished by simple commercial relations.

Imperialism is thus the systematic action of an organized people upon another people whose organization is defective, and it presupposes that it is the state itself, and not only some individuals, which is responsible for the mission....

The great value of colonies ... is not only that they serve to catch the overflow population of the mother country, nor even that they open a particularly reliable area of investment for excess capital, it is also that they give a sharp stimulus to the commerce of the country, that they strengthen and support its industry and furnish to its inhabitants - industrialists, workers, consumers - a growth of profits, of wages, or of interest). But.... these advantages resulting from the prosperity of the colonies, are not limited just to the mother countries; they extend to all the countries of the old world [i.e., Europe] and in fact there is not a nation which does not derive a real benefit from this increase in the productivity of humanity.... Imperialism has caused the opening of new sources of production. . . . It is thus that unknown products have been brought to the consumers of Europe to increase their comfort. . . . That is the first and incontestable result of imperialism. And this is the second: It is to open the new markets for the sale of products manufactured in Europe, markets more profitable and more expandable than those we have been limited to previously, because the new societies have an ability to grow and to create and accumulate riches infinitely greater than the old societies. Thus trade is stimulated and extended, the division of labour is augmented; industry having before it wider openings can and must produce more and such production on a greater scale calls for new improvements and new advances. . . .

(Ref.: S. Pollard et al., *Documents of European Economic History*, Vol. 2, pp.165-7)