Imperialism: Good or Bad?

EUGENE GENOVESE

American imperialism arose, as Professor McDonald says, from a "mixture of psychological impulses." All social action does, and his account of the mixture here offers us a good starting point. Unfortunately, he forgets racism. The post-Reconstruction bashing of blacks had provided a powerful spur to increasingly sophisticated and vile racist theories and increasingly vicious practices. The triumph of legal segregation, lynching, and disfranchisement proceeded hand-in-hand with empire-building, the subjugation of nonwhite peoples abroad.

Imperialism, in Britain and Germany as well as in the United States, sought to unite citizens at home in a national project of economic development and its ruling justification, the pursuit of national glory. The "Progressives" in particular promoted an imperialist foreign policy that would, they claimed, fulfill "the promise of American life." The national leaders who promoted imperialist policies were, in effect, waging a two-front war. Abroad, they struggled with competitors for the prizes of imperialist expansion. At home, they struggled with internal opponents to capitalist development. For champions of imperialism, success on the first front required success on the second: they needed a united front between capital and labor at home to beat their competitors abroad. The unity they had in mind consisted more in the domination of capital over labor—the free development of monopoly capital—than in an equal partnership between the two. But as the external struggle grew, liberal and reformist movements, and in time even the great European social democratic parties, fell into line behind the imperialist policies promising national glory.

As the imperialist alliance developed at home, working people won significant concessions from the ruling class, although they did not win control of national policy. But the great strength of the imperialist program lay in its ability to provide a higher standard of living for the working people of the imperialist nations than their counterparts in the losing nations of the imperialist struggle enjoyed. This kind of national glory encouraged racism, jingoism, and ethnocentrism among people at home. Yet even these policies did not spare capitalism lusty political opposition.

Imperialism, we are now told, was good for the colonials. Try Algeria. When the French invaded in 1830 they sent a rag-tail army with an illiteracy rate substantially higher than that found among their "backward" opponents. When they were finally thrown out after the Second World War, they left a poverty-stricken, illiterate Muslim population behind them—a people that has made remarkable progress since then. There as elsewhere, the culture of the nation—in this case founded on the great tradition of Islam—had been denigrated and placed under harsh assault. The brutal French conquest of the civilized, peaceful, advanced people of Madagascar was even worse. The law and order the British brought to India claimed more lives than will ever be counted. The Belgians, after having reduced the population of the Congo (now Zaire) by half, finally left the country bankrupt, illiterate, and in anarchy. The American pacification of the Philippines managed to pacify thousands of Filipinos whose corpses we piled high as punishment for the crime of having fought against an alien invader and the plundering of their national resources.

According to Professor McDonald, it was all for their own good. Like hell it was.
FORREST MCDONALD

While the United States began to expand overseas about the same time that several nations of Western Europe were doing so, it did not have their motives. The burgeoning industrial nations of Europe—especially Great Britain, Germany, and France, and on a smaller scale Italy, Holland, and Belgium—needed raw materials, markets, and places to invest surplus capital, and they acquired these by taking political control of most of primitive Africa and decadent Asia. In the United States, only New England textile and shoe manufacturers, with false visions of markets in China, had any economic motivation for imperialism. This country was so richly endowed with raw materials that, in the main, the acquisition of overseas possessions with similar materials would merely bring competition for domestic producers. Nor did we need external markets; Americans regularly consumed upwards of ninety percent of what they produced. Economically the United States more nearly resembled a colony than a seat of empire. It exported almost four times as much in food and raw materials as it did in manufactured goods, and it was a debtor nation, a net importer of capital as well as manufactures.

The motives for American imperialism were psychological. The nation had the urge to be big, simply for the sake of being big, and it wished to prove that it had strength and character to match its size. This was an awkward, adolescent time for the United States in its relationship to the outside world. Like a suddenly grown teenager it had the physical equipment of a man and the emotional and mental equipment of a child. It was restless, cocky, insecure, irresponsible, awed by its strengths and its desires; but its heart was good and it sorely wanted to be a great leader of nations. Accordingly, it could be a bully, as it showed in Hawaii, and it could bellow and flex its muscles and enjoy making the powers of Europe fear its might. Most of all, it took pride in its role as the protector of liberties of the less fortunate countries in the Americas, even when those countries preferred not to have its protection.

Behind it all was the Puritan heritage. As Josiah Strong expressed the nation’s puritanical sense of mission, “this race of unequalled energy, with all the majesty of numbers and the might of wealth behind it—the representative, let us hope, of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest civilization—having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind, will spread itself over the earth.”

For more than thirty years it has been customary to denounce colonialism as an unmitigated evil, whatever its motivation. Colonialism in fact was good for the colonized. They were often worked hard, but European or American rule greatly improved their material standards of living; millions upon millions of people had, for the first time, enough to eat, clothes to wear, and roofs over their heads. But material betterment was only part of the benefi t. In most of the colonial world, imperialism replaced incessant warfare or brutal tyranny with order, law, and security; it brought medical care and some measure of sanitation; and through the white man imposed his rule, the colored peoples of the colonial world were more nearly free from oppressive government than ever before. Imperialism had benign long-range effects. Dictatorial politicians in the so-called Third World today inspire guilt among Westerners (and extortion from them) by charging that exploitation retarded the development of their countries, but the opposite was true. Those countries of the Third World whose contacts with Western Europe and America were longest and most intensive are the most advanced, and those whose contacts were least are the least advanced.

The American brand of imperialism was not, however, beneficial for America. For all the goodness and might of the United States, the urge to “spread itself over the earth” and the self-appointed mission “to impress its institutions upon mankind” were more than a trifle presumptuous. In the fullness of time, they might prove to be suicidal.