

Imperialism and Charity
Lessons of the British Empire

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Where there is empire there is charity. This is a controversial suggestion, merely because imperialism has traditionally been seen by Americans as being evil. The nation developed from its own colonized roots to be the antithesis to empire, serving as a beacon of self-determination and individual freedom from state aggression. After World War II, empires were seen as a thing of the past as nations moved toward decolonization. Recently, scholars have increasingly accepted the notion that the United States, if not from the beginning, is now an empire. Numerous studies on imperialism compare America's foreign policy to the behaviors of empires of the past. Some of these studies take a positive view toward America playing an important role throughout the world, but most seem to be negative. If America is in any way similar to an empire, it would most likely be comparable to the British Empire. An analysis of the writings of British colonial administrators over the past two centuries will show the positive influences of imperialism. Though not every motivation of empires is charitable, British imperial strategies maintained altruistic goals of helping "lesser" civilizations. These same philanthropic visions exist in various forms that today are not seen as imperial, yet there is no difference. In a world of advanced communications and transportation, wherever there is need for charity an appeal for empire is being made. These requests are not for evil empires of subjection, but empires of liberty, much like Jefferson envisioned.

In a world where principles of equality are espoused, the nations of the world remain in relative inequality with each other. Some nations are wealthy while others are poor. The wealthiest nations believe in equality, liberty, and the right to pursue happiness. As such, when they are in the position to help others, imperialism is the logical step. According to Edward Said, "human societies, at least the most advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything

but imperialism.”¹ Is it not odd that advanced cultures all seem to move toward imperialism, and is it not likewise interesting that Said views imperialism as an offering? Said’s own *Orientalism* seeks to explain Western views of otherness, and although he attributes much of it to racism and the desire for superiority, his labeling of empires as advanced cultures already assumes this dominance. Is it not possible that nations that are superior simply wish to offer imperialism, or in other words, charity? Charity is evident throughout the writings of early British colonial strategists and administrators.

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, an early nineteenth century British imperial strategist, believed that Britain could charitably raise the Malay nations to liberty and equality through imperialism. He argued that many of the perceived shortcomings of colonial populations were due to inferior institutions, rather than some innate lack of human potential in a given race. One of these second-rate traditions, according to Raffles, was the religion of Islam. In a letter to Lord Minto, Raffles argued that “under the pretext of instructing the Malays in the principles of the Mohomedan religion, [the Arabs] inculcate the most intolerant bigotry, and render them incapable of receiving any species of useful knowledge.”² In his view, the Arabs were not the only ones to blame, either. Excessive and oppressive imperialism under the Dutch was also preventing progression. Raffles believed that Malaysians “would gladly ally themselves to so powerful a nation as the English on any thing like fair and equitable terms, by which they might be secured from civil commotions and the oppression of foreigners, without being deprived of all their natural advantages, as under the Dutch domination.”³ By avoiding the pitfalls of aggressive imperialism, Britain could effectively “create a powerful and active nation in the centre of the

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 204.

² Lady Sophia Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 71.

Eastern Islands, attached to the English by benefits, and looking to them in a great measure for protection.”⁴ In the twenty-first century, the United States has followed these principles in their own efforts to establish democracy in the Middle East. While American leaders do not directly challenge Islam, they do confront Islamic terrorism and the issues of religion that separate people. By promoting religious liberty, Americans wish to prevent the deprivation of natural laws guaranteed in their own Constitution. Since these are principles that the United States have enjoyed for over two centuries, nation-building is seen as a patriarchal duty of raising children to become like their forebears. In Raffles view, righteous imperialism was also similar to a father-son relationship, where the boy would be nurtured and loved. Eventually, he would grow to equal the aptitude and skill of his father and both would be edified.

British imperialists viewed themselves as fathers of the world, believing they could bring higher levels of civilization to undeveloped nations. This included bringing not only knowledge and protection to inferior societies but also production and commerce, much in the way a father teaches his occupational trade to his son. Lord Frederick Lugard, a British colonial administrator in tropical Africa, believed that the British were “in Africa for the mutual benefit of her own industrial classes and of the native races in their progress towards a higher plane. [...] It is the aim and desire of civilized administrations to fulfill this dual mandate.”⁵ Lugard’s dual mandate was the theoretical foundation on which British humanitarianism by colonialism rested. In *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Jürgen Osterhammel explains Lugard’s view of colonialism as “guardianship by developed nations [...] essential in all areas: politically, since the Africans were allegedly incapable of self-rule [...], economically, since work ethics and basic economic skills would have to be instilled in the populace, and culturally, since Africans

⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁵ Lord Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: Blackwood, 1922), 617.

and Asians would be incapable of freeing themselves from their usual bad habits.”⁶ Likewise, the United States engages in similar guardianship throughout the world.

American imperialism through political, economic and cultural means is often exercised through international organizations. The United Nations works to prevent wars and ensure the sovereignty of nation-states. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund are economic guardians of modern-day imperialism which attempt to teach work ethics and provide the ability of developing nations to succeed in a global capitalist economy and one day become developed. Also, understanding that some cultural norms indicate greater threats of violence, the International Court is established to challenge acts of genocide throughout the world. In all of these situations, the United States takes a leading role, much in the same way the British Empire did during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each of these areas of guardianship is no different than a father’s duty to instill independence, hard work and self-control in his children.

With such a responsibility of power, even a father can take advantage of his children, and NGO’s (Non-Government Organizations) help to counter-balance mistreatment by national and international state institutions. To the British, religious organizations participated in monitoring the virtue of imperialism. Especially where “sexual exploitation of native women was nothing out of the ordinary,” as Osterhammel describes, “a heightened moral awareness [was] fostered by vigilant missionaries.”⁷ Today, religious leaders continue to promote morality and integrity, but even scholars who oppose imperialism often encourage these virtues of empire. In *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa’s Oil*, John Ghazvinian discusses the exploitation of resources in Africa, not only by developed nations but also by corrupt leaders within Africa. While Ghazvinian rejects the possibility of the international community imperially removing

⁶ Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), 110.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

tyrannical leaders and setting up righteous colonies, he does support the possibility of involvement through NGO's and charitable organizations.⁸ At the heart of Ghazvinian's beliefs is the fatherly desire to protect the independent spirit, or sovereignty, of his children while imperially aiding their growth and development.

As respectful parents, British imperialists wanted to create mutually beneficial relationships with the nations they occupied. As Osterhammel clarifies, British imperial strategies "presupposed a complementary rather than an exploitative relationship between colonized and colonizers, since each side required the other."⁹ The harmonizing goals of imperialism were sought by John Sydenham Furnivall, an early twentieth century British colonial administrator in Burma. In his *Colonial Policy and Practice*, Furnivall explained that "the training of Europeans and Indonesians is complementary [and] aims at making Europeans understand the East and Indonesians understand the West."¹⁰ This view is supported in Said's *Orientalism*, where he examines "the work of innumerable devoted scholars who edited texts and translated them, codified grammars, wrote dictionaries, reconstructed dead epochs, [and] produced positivistically verifiable learning."¹¹ To encourage international studies, the United States today accepts and sends students from and around the world through student exchange and visa programs. This is often achieved through independent grants and scholarships that may not have imperialism in mind, but through which empire is always strengthened. Foreign students who come to America to study may gain an appreciation for the freedoms and liberties enjoyed in the United States, thus making them more favorable toward America. In addition, American

⁸ John Ghazvinian, "Untapped: The Scramble for Africa's Oil" (book presented at SDSU, San Diego, California, 30 October 2008).

⁹ Osterhammel, 110.

¹⁰ J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1956 [1948]), 259.

¹¹ Said, 203.

students who are sent to foreign cultures learn languages and cultures which better enable the United States to raise future generations of possible ambassadors and imperial administrators. This is why the U.S. State Department engages in numerous of these grants and scholarships. The American Empire is following the British model, where it was understood that by collecting and studying Oriental writings, they could better understand each other, much like a parent trying to comprehend the foreign life of an adolescent.

In order for parents to aid their children in overcoming pubescent challenges, added time and dedication is often required. The British likewise understood these obligations when engaging in philanthropic imperialism. Whenever empire brought charity, charity likewise increased the need for empire. In other words, “humanitarian ideals were gradually reinforced by practical considerations,” as Furnivall explained, “because the growth of commerce and the extension of Government activities created a demand for clerks.”¹² The more charitable the empire, the more centralized it needed to become, so that individual programs would remain effective without becoming overly aggressive. This centralizing mission not only strengthened the empire but also laid the foundation for nation-building. Imperial strategists understood that when power was exercised, it was important to remember the end desire of transmitting authority to native populations. Even Gandhi recognized that “many Englishmen desire Home Rule for India,” and that “if [Indians] are just to them, [India] shall receive her support in [its] progress towards the goal.”¹³ In modern times, this goal is often voiced by American leaders when discussing the future of Iraq. To lessen civil commotion, the United States government has aided the Iraqi government in centralizing power, but efforts are made to ensure a reasonable transition.

¹² Furnivall, 258.

¹³ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1: Civilization, Politics & Religion*, ed. Raghavan Iyer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 203.

Reason and practicality dictated British imperial ventures in civilizing and uplifting nations, and this meant that, above all, education was imperative. If native populations were ever to maintain self-rule, they needed to be knowledgeable about liberal principles and governance. They needed to be taught to abandon “savagery” and embrace civilization. When serving as Native Affairs Commissioner in Canada, Lord Bury observed that “the Indians [...] were moving towards the level of civilization at which they could look after themselves.”¹⁴ Lord Bury rested his faith not in commerce or politics but education and learning. He believed that any “weakness would disappear in a generation if schooling were handled correctly.”¹⁵ This did not mean, however, that the British could expend all resources available in providing education. If the British Empire were to remain effective in bringing natives to the point of self-rule, they needed to prevent excessive taxation that would inhibit their growth, while at the same time providing humanitarian efforts to educate them.¹⁶

Humanitarian efforts of education are evident in American imperialism as well. While the United States offers grants for foreign students to study in America, educational imperialism also exists outside of government actions. For instance, in 2007, talk-show host Oprah Winfrey opened a Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa. By focusing on the education of girls, “Winfrey said she hoped she could help ‘change the face of a nation.’”¹⁷ The fact that Winfrey is of African ancestry may cloud the idea that her efforts of promoting western education in Africa is imperialism, but empire does not require racial differences. In modern Africa, for instance, Mahmood Mamdani describes “a bifurcated world, no longer simply racially organized,

¹⁴ Edward Beasley, *Empire as the Triumph of Theory: Imperialism, information, and the Colonial Society of 1868* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 95.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ Associated Press, “Oprah opens school for girls in South Africa,” on MSNBC, 2 January 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16435995/> (accessed 17 December 2008).

but a world in which the dividing line between those human and the rest less human is a line between those who labor on the land and those who do not.”¹⁸ Winfrey’s school in Africa is more than a fulfilled promise to Nelson Mandela, but also a way to fulfill Mamdani’s aspiration “to link the urban and the rural – and thereby a series of related binary opposites such as rights and custom, representation and participation, centralization and decentralization, civil society and community – in ways that have yet to be done.”¹⁹ Winfrey’s attempt to build this link and lessen the effects of poverty through education is also conducted at the state level. The Office of Overseas Schools under the U.S. State Department implements programs throughout the world. In addition to assisting Americans living abroad, this office seeks to “to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by upgrading educational institutions which serve to demonstrate *American educational principles* and methods employed in the United States.”²⁰ Offering western education as superior to foreign institutions, whether under the guise of the government or individual philanthropy, is a product of imperialism. Empires of the past have turned to education, and the colonized have often benefited from these ventures.

Western education, especially of women, is also promoted by colonial subjects, even when they have no intent of sponsoring imperialism. In Java, for instance, Kartini discussed the importance of teaching the Javanese nobility, and stressed that education would provide a “moral foundation.”²¹ Similar to Winfrey’s emphasis on girl’s education, Kartini suggested that women specifically were granted a special ability within nature of “raising society’s moral standards.”²² As

¹⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁰ Bureau of Administration, “Office of Overseas Schools,” U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/> (accessed 18 December 2008). Italics added.

²¹ Kartini, “Educate the Javanese!” trans. Jean Taylor, *Indonesia* 17 (1974), 86 & 90.

²² *Ibid.*, 87.

such, Kartini promoted western teaching of young women to provide hope for Java in the future. Winfrey's benevolent enterprise is likewise meant to provide hope for Africa through educating its future women leaders. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that one of the positive influences of American occupation in Afghanistan is increased opportunities for women to attend higher institutions of learning. These efforts are supported by NATO as well as various NGO's, such as the Zonta Club of Grants Pass, an Oregon-based institution dedicated to advancing opportunities for women throughout the world. This small organization engages in service projects throughout the world, including providing "education for more than 2,500 women and girls in eight community-based educational learning centers" in Afghanistan.²³ Similar to Kartini's acceptance of western education, women in Afghanistan continue to promote America's empire of education. Sima Samar, for instance, requests "the international community to send more peace troops," as she calls them, in addition to "money for reconstruction [...] to bring democracy and peace to the country and give women and girls rights – at least the basic human rights such as access to education and health care."²⁴ By requesting education to be brought by troops to ensure security, Samar is in full support of the type of imperialism that existed under the British Empire.

Even blatant anti-imperialists realized the benefits of western education when the British ruled. Although Gandhi argued that agricultural civilization and hard labor were superior to western urbanization and education, he himself benefited from the British education he received. He spoke against western education, but admitted that in his "desire to serve and in endeavoring to fulfill that desire, I make use of the education I have received."²⁵ When questioning whether or not English

²³ Herstory, "Achievements through the 61 Year," Zonta Club of Grants Pass, <http://www.zontagrantspass.org/herstory/> (accessed 18 December 2008).

²⁴ Sima Samar, "Acceptance Speech by Dr. Sima Samar," John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award Ceremony at the JFK Library Foundation, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Education+and+Public+Programs/Profile+in+Courage+Award/Award+Recipients/Sima+Samar/Acceptance+Speech+by+Dr.+Sima+Samar.htm> (accessed 18 December 2008).

²⁵ Gandhi, 253.

education was necessary for India to acquire Home Rule, Gandhi replied, “My answer is yes and no.”²⁶ He certainly did not wish to support British imperialism, but he could not deny that he had been able to make use of the education provided by the Empire. The story of Gandhi is, in fact, the success of British imperialism. By bringing charity to those less fortunate, the British were able to introduce civilization to peoples eventually able to speak up for themselves, calling for the completion of empire, and the transition to independent nation-states.

When Thomas Jefferson imagined an empire of liberty, he believed that principles of enlightened gentility, civilization and education could perfect imperialism, enabling it to succeed without coercive force. Since the American Empire would be based on liberty, rather than force or power, “it would be strong because it had the confidence of a virtuous citizenry, because in such a government every man ‘would fly to the standard of the law, and would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concern’.”²⁷ In the process of charitable nation-building, whether through governmental or non-governmental institutions, developing nations become developed and colonized children develop into adulthood. Although American imperialism can be closely compared to the British Empire, it must be remembered that even British imperialists exerted overly-aggressive tactics. Numerous writings regarding British imperialism reveal problems with racism, over-privilege and even subjugation. Some motivations for empire are self-serving, but the few points made here by British imperial administrators show that where there is empire there can also be charity. In comparing British imperial strategies to modern altruism and philanthropy, the goal of helping “lesser” civilizations remains the same. Without taking on the label of imperialism, the American Empire continues to grow as individuals and groups promote the superiority of western education and industrialization across the globe.

²⁶ Ibid., 253.

²⁷ Robert W. Tucker & David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 21.

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