

THE DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVE IN WESTERN COLONIAL THEORY

BY

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Long before Asian national leaders opted for or against economic development as the road to national survival or independence, problems of underdevelopment and development strategy, as they would now be called, had presented themselves in theory and practice to Western colonial policy makers and administrators.

"Colonies", one of the Encyclopaedists said, "were made by and for the mother country".¹ Francis Bacon, a century earlier, had been no less candid: "It cannot be affirmed, if we speak ingeniously, that it was the propagation of the Christian faith that was the [motive]... of the discovery, entry and plantation of the new world; but gold and silver, and temporal profit and glory."²

There is no doubt that, throughout the centuries of European colonialism, the metropolitan governments' primary concern was their countries' national interests, as they saw them, and that among these interests economic ones were never absent and often dominant. It is therefore tempting to dismiss all motives which ostensibly had the welfare of native populations in mind - the salvation of souls in the eighteenth and the blessings of western civilisation and economic progress in the nineteenth - as mere rationalisations. This would certainly be simplistic. There was always a mixture of motives.

Charles Grant, a former Chairman of the East India Company and member of the evangelical Clapham Sect, was without doubt completely sincere when, in his treatise on India, he posed the rhetorical question: "In considering the affairs of the world as under the control of the Supreme Disposer, and those distant territories... providentially put into our hands, ...is it not necessary to conclude that they were given to us, not merely that we might draw an annual profit from them, but that we might diffuse among their inhabitants, long sunk in darkness, vice and misery, the light and benign influence of the truth, the blessings of well-regulated society, the improvements and comforts of active industry?"³ When he added that "in every step of this work, we shall also serve the original design with which he visited India, that design still so important to this country - the extension of our commerce",⁴ he was indulging in the common practice of the Evangelicals of seeking "to carry their aims by harnessing their cause to the most powerful political force of their time, the interests of British commerce",⁵ much as do-gooders of the Foreign Aid lobby in our time think it necessary to sell their message by stressing export promotion as a by-product of development assistance. Similarly, "the material urge for commercial expansion and the moral urge to eradicate slavery... were unexpected yet logical bedfellows" in the 1830 expedition that led to the first British settlement in Nigeria, "for the great philanthropic faith was in the civilizing blessing of what was regularly referred to as 'legitimate trade' and was regarded as the antidote and substitute for the obnoxious 'slave-trade'".⁶ Half a century later, the partisans of French imperialism, "for the most part strong nationalists and republicans... sought to enlist support for their cause by using the appeal of the economic argument".⁷

There is ample evidence of genuine concern for the welfare of the subject people of the colonies in the writings of many western colonial theorists and administrators. It is another question whether any of them envisaged a process of economic development for the native populations, in the sense of generally rising living standards, the sort of material progress that was going on in their own countries. The general conclusion suggested by a large literature is that, until very near the outbreak of World War II, the benefits which Western colonial policies sought for the indigenous populations rarely explicitly included economic progress in this sense. In so far as they aimed at economic development, it was primarily development of the natural resources of the colonies for their own countries' benefit or at best that of the world at large.

For three centuries the main economic motive of Western expansion was the lure of gold and silver and of the profit from trade in tropical products and the main non-economic motive "the proselytising spirit inherent in Christian teachings".⁸ Both went hand in hand. In the words of a historian of the Portuguese empire, "I do not pretend that our sole aim was to preach, if others will allow that it was not only to trade."⁹

Even when propagation of the faith or, in the protestant version, "the evangelisation of India's heathen millions"¹⁰, was no longer the dominant theme, Western colonisers, with few dissenting voices, were sublimely convinced that they were the bearers of civilisation,¹¹ that they were bringing to Indians, and later to other Asians and Africans, "the pacific triumph of reason over barbarism".¹² When William Wilberforce referred to "the vast superiority even of European laws and institutions, and far more of British institutions, over those of Asia",¹³ he was merely trumpeting forth what most of his contemporaries quietly took for granted. The belief that they had a "civilising mission" which imbued the emissaries of Victorian England played an even greater role in French colonial theory. From the days of Louis XIV when a royal decree laid it down that "the natives, once converted to Catholicism, were to be considered 'citizens and natural Frenchmen'",¹⁴ la mission civilisatrice, born of the conviction that French culture represented the acme of human achievement and a priceless gift to all who could be helped to share it, continued as the central idea of French colonial thought and practice. Meanwhile, however, at least in British writings about India and the colonies, claims had begun to be made that British rule would bring material as well as moral and intellectual benefits.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the mercantilist justification of British rule in India, tribute, had disappeared, as the East India Company's administrative expenses absorbed all its revenue.¹⁵ When the closure of the Continental market by Napoleon encouraged British merchants to extend their trade to Asia, India began to be seen as a potential market for British manufacturers. Manufacturers and traders acquired a direct interest in Indian welfare, but the only inference for economic policy drawn from this was, in the spirit of laissez faire doctrine, to reduce the role of government. Free traders even began to question the need for colonial rule. As Macaulay put it in a famous passage: "The mere extent of empire is not necessarily an advantage... To the great trading nation, to the great manufacturing nation, no progress which any portion of the human race can make in knowledge, in taste for the convenience of life, or in the wealth by which those conveniences are produced, can be a matter of indifference. It is scarcely possible to calculate the benefits which we might derive from

the diffusion of European civilisation among the vast population of the East." One day, "having become instructed in European knowledge [Indians] may demand European institutions.... Whenever it comes, it will be the proudest day in English history. To have found a great people sunk in the lowest depths of slavery and superstition, to have so ruled them as to have made them desirous and capable of all the privileges of citizens, would indeed buy a title to glory all our own."¹⁶

Meanwhile, however, while there was no doubt an unspecific belief that free trade would benefit India as well as Britain, specific benefits were much more clearly visible for the latter. If India becomes open to free trade, wrote one enthusiast, "under a mild, liberal, and effective government,... what a sudden change we might not anticipate? We should not only see the palaces of the Rajah, ... furnished and decorated with the produce of English arts and manufacturers, but the Ryots, who form so large a part of the Indian population, may, like the British farmers, have a taste for foreign produce, as soon as they can acquire property enough to procure it."¹⁷ How they were to acquire property enough the author did not go on to consider.

Laissez faire liberalism did not have the field to itself. The utilitarians who exercised great influence on British policy towards India in the first half of the nineteenth century believed that "the vices and defects of the masses of mankind arose not from a lack of schooling but from poverty."¹⁸ But since they also believed that "poverty is the effect of bad laws, and bad government", their remedy, "no less easy than sure", was good government. "Light taxes and good laws; nothing more is wanting for national and individual prosperity all over the globe."¹⁹ Others, especially among those who had experienced the problems of administering a huge country of different culture, were much less confident that they had the answers. One, in the spirit of Edmund Burke, warned: "The ruling vice of our government is innovation... It is time that we should learn that neither the face of the country, its property, nor its society, are things that can be suddenly improved by any contrivance of ours, though they may be greatly injured by what we mean for their good."²⁰ Even James Mill who, in the peroration of his monumental History of British India, felt able to claim that British rule had given Indians the benefit of "exemption from the fatal consequences of native mis-rule" added a prophetic reservation about "the evils which are inseparable from the nature of the connexion that subsists between the Government of India and its subjects - the unnatural rule of foreign masters... whose only sympathy with the natives of India arises from a sense of duty."²¹ But such doubts did not significantly impinge upon the predominant climate of opinion or on the course of colonial policy.

The last three decades of the nineteenth century brought a marked change in colonial theory and policy, from laissez faire liberalism to imperialism. Again, economic and non-economic factors intermingled in bringing about the change. Among the economic ones the most important was the emergence of new opportunities for profitable investment in mining and plantation enterprise to meet the West's growing demand for food and industrial raw materials, and in supportive public works in transport and irrigation financed by loan capital. While Manchester manufacturers - and Macaulay - could view with detachment the prospect of an independent India because it would still provide a market for British manufacturers, "capitalists engaged in western enterprise in the tropics and concerned for their supplies of raw materials demanded a more active and intensive colonial policy."²²

Whether, as Hobson and Lenin argued, rival economic interests of this kind were behind it or whether every self-respecting imperialist believed, as one of the French imperialists of the time put it, that his country "had to possess and overseas empire as a condition of national freedom and greatness"²³ and looked for economic reasons to justify empire, the 1870s and 1880s brought the scramble for colonies which carved up among the Western powers all hitherto unclaimed territories.

The fact that colonial policy, in the era of imperialism, sounded a new note of responsibility for the welfare of the subject people - notions of "White Man's Burden" and "trusteeship" - has been attributed partly to a need for self-justification. Since men like to justify their activities on moral grounds, colonial policy "must now be justified to world opinion with reference to world welfare".²⁴ It has also been linked with "social and political evolution in Western society."²⁵ As labour entered politics and governments responded with social legislation at home, "the earlier policy of laissez faire was gradually transformed into a policy of actively promoting economic progress, and this was slowly permeated by ideas of social justice and concern for the welfare of the people."²⁶ Growing fears of cheap labour competition probably also played a part: "The condition of labour in the tropics became a matter of economic interest, and welfare measures began to assume a new importance in colonial policy."²⁷

The objective of native welfare, it is important to note, was throughout this period regarded as quite distinct from that of economic progress or development. As a historian of French colonial policy has expressed it, the new colonial theorists demanded "a policy by which the conqueror would be most able to develop the conquered region economically, but also one in which the conqueror realized his responsibility to the native's... mental and physical well-being"²⁸ - the "dual mandate" of British colonial theory.²⁹

Economic development meant what the historian of The Economic Development of the British Overseas Empire meant by it when she referred to "the remarkable economic achievements within the Empire during the past centuries... the hacking down of the forest or the sheep rearing or the gold mining which made Canada, Australia and South Africa into world factors... or the struggle with the overwhelming forces of nature which took shape in the unromantic guise of 'Public Works' in India"³⁰ or, in J S Furnivall's words, in his Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma, "the development of the material resources of Burma through trade and economic enterprise".³¹ It was certainly not synonymous with native welfare, though it could be expected to contribute to it indirectly, as was suggested in a resolution of the French Colonial Congress of 1904 that "colonial governments concentrate their efforts on the economic development most likely to assure [the natives'] wellbeing along with that of the colonists".³²

In 1929, the British Parliament passed a Colonial Development Act. Ten years later it was replaced by a Colonial Development and Welfare Act. W K Hancock commented on the latter: "'Development and Welfare' will probably be the cry of the generation which follows the present one... In the nineteenth century development occurred as a by-product of profit." The new concept is quite different. "It gives a positive economic and social content to the philosophy of colonial trusteeship by affirming the need for minimum standards of nutrition, health and education."³³

Not only were economic progress and native welfare distinct but, in the view of some experienced colonial administrators, the former was frequently unconnected with, or even destructive of, the latter. The Dutch scholar, J H Boeke, on the basis of his study of the Netherlands East Indies, formulated the theory of dualistic development according to which "the most important and immediate result of the steadily increasing intrusion of Western technique... is that native production is pushed more and more into the background... The mass of the [native] population take an ever more modest and slighter share in the economic development of the country."³⁴ Furnivall, on the basis of his experience in Burma, took an even more pessimistic view. He questioned whether the economic progress which the British had brought to Burma "was a sufficient guarantee of general welfare... There is good reason to believe that the cultivators, as individuals, were vastly better off from a material standpoint under British than under Burmese rule."³⁵ But "the mere maintenance of law and order set free economic forces which dissolved the village into individuals... The annexation destroyed the Burmese social order and probably nothing less catastrophic would have cleared the way for reconstruction; but the destruction of a civilisation is in itself an offence against humanity."³⁶

During World War II, the British Government published an economic plan for Jamaica prepared by the economist, F Benham, written very much in the spirit of Hancock's slogan of "development and welfare". It was severely criticised by W Arthur Lewis who acknowledged that it implied recognition that "positive measures to raise the standard of living in the colonies should have high priority" but argued that it is necessary to distinguish between "social welfare" and "economic development". "The principal object of colonial policy should be to enable the colonies to stand on their own legs as soon as possible. This can be done only through their rapid economic development."³⁷ Here "economic development" no longer meant mere development of natural resources but much more nearly what it came to mean in the post-1945 years.

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HISTORY OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT CONFERENCES

EXETER COLLEGE, OXFORD - 17 TO 19 SEPTEMBER, 1981

BY

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After singing the praises of the "British model" for organising history of economic thought conferences at the business meeting of the inaugural Australian History of Economic Thought Conferences in Armidale this year (see HETSA Newsletter No. 1, pp.13-14), it was especially pleasant to see the virtues of this "model" confirmed at the very successful conference organised in September by Walter Eltis (Exeter College, Oxford). The quality of the papers presented (if modesty allows me to make that statement), the interesting nature of the formal discussion of papers, as well as the informal discussion which took place over drinks at the bar in the Junior Common Room at Exeter College, made me exceedingly pleased to have been able to accept the invitation to present a paper at the conference to commemorate the bi-centenary of Turgot's death. Since the official proceedings of the conference will be duly reported in the British Newsletter, I intend only to give some personal impressions of the conference, its programme, its participants and its general qualities which appealed to me personally.