

**THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF
IMPERIALISM AND ZIONISM** Edward W. Said

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Both as a system of social, political, and cultural oppression, and as a vision of the world, imperialism has been common in all ages. Most cultures, at the moment of their dominance, have tried to impose their will upon other, weaker cultures. Invariably, imperialism promotes a peculiar and even an esoteric mythology. Some of its myths include the views that a strong culture is a superior one, that reality itself can be altered at will in order to create 'natural' hierarchies, that the dominant nation belongs to a master race, and so forth. All of these ideas are to be found in one form or another during the zenith of all the great European and Asian and American empires.

Yet during the nineteenth century imperialism acquired a new and strong form, and it is during the history of nineteenth-century European intellectual culture that one will find the common origins of imperialism and Zionism, origins that precede Herzl and the colonization of Palestine in the 1880s. Very briefly, I should like to sketch the intellectual roots of imperialism and Zionism, because, I think, as victims of both, we have not taken enough note of the history, the methodology, and the epistemology of the great systems of oppression that still affect us today and that are the legacy of nineteenth-century political and cultural thought. For until we see them in their full historical richness, we will make the mistake of thinking that racism is a recent thing, or that it is a passing, relatively young phenomenon which will go away. The fact is, as I hope to show, that Zionism and imperialism draw on each other; each in its own way, they sit at the very centre of Western intellectual and political culture; and they are facts, not of immorality or injustice, but of a political and scientific will to domination over the so-called coloured, non-European peoples of the Third World. The struggle against imperialism and racism is a civilizational struggle, and we cannot wage it successfully unless we understand its systems of ideas and where they originate. Only then can we struggle scientifically against them.

The period of the rise of modern imperialism, of which Zionism is a part, goes further back than 1870, which is when Hobson and Arendt said that it began. As a system of thought, modern European imperialism is rooted in the early nineteenth century - its span of greatest influence coincides exactly with the period of vast territorial acquisition by the great European powers. We must remember that, between

1815 and 1918, Europe's colonial empires in Asia and Africa and Latin America increased from 35% of the total surface of the earth to 85% of it. What we must ask now are the following questions: first, what were the principal characteristics of European imperialism? And, second, how did Zionism arise organically out of the system, and the very visions, of European imperialism?

As to the first question, imperialism is a political philosophy whose whole aim is territorial expansion and the legitimization of territorial expansion. The difference between nineteenth-century imperialism, modern imperialism, and every other preceding sort is that nineteenth-century and modern imperialism is based on a quasi-scientific and systematically effective vision of reality. Indeed it can be said that the history of imperialism is the history of the uses and abuses, the formation and the deformation, of modern science. I want to emphasize this. The components of modern scientific imperialism are, first, philosophical, and, second, economic and territorial. When, in 1918, Clemenceau stated that he believed he had 'an unlimited right of levying black troops to assist in the defence of French territory in Europe if France were attacked in the future by Germany,' he was saying that by some scientific right France had the knowledge and the power to convert blacks into what Poincaré called an economic form of gunfodder (ammunition) for the white Frenchman.

Now the source of this power is a particular kind of knowledge and the kind of practices which it legitimates. It is the knowledge gained by European science during the early nineteenth century to classify, to type, the world and its inhabitants into stronger and weaker, backward and advanced, superior and inferior types. The very root of modern imperialism is the idea of systematic classification, and this idea - in such sciences as biology, linguistics, anthropology, and history - is the principal achievement of nineteenth-century European science. Imperialism drew from this achievement a deformed principle, and applied it wilfully to the world of men. If you look at comparative anatomy, for example, you will note the tradition of taxonomy, which goes from Linnaeus and Buffon and culminates in Cuvier's Le règne animal (1817), in which all nature is divided into discrete species, genera, types, characters, and categories, each having irreducible natural traits and characteristics. Cuvier carried this further, just as Darwin's ideas were carried

further and incorrectly applied to men and societies: that men themselves could be divided into white, red, yellow, brown, and black types; whites were rational, quick, dominant; blacks, he said, were phlegmatic, incapable of certain kinds of ratiocination; yellows were scheming, silent; reds were savage and choleric, and so forth. Such notions of the different classes of men were concentrated and brought to their full racialist expression in the work of Gobineau, and later of course in Spengler.

Supporting the taxonomy of natural history and comparative anatomy was the taxonomy of linguistics. With the discovery of the structural affinity between groups or families of language by such linguists as Jones, Bopp, and Schlegel, there began as well the classification of language families into ethno-cultural and racial types. In 1808 Schlegel saw, he said, a difference between the Indo-Germanic or Aryan languages on the one hand, and, on the other, the Semitic-African languages. The Aryan languages were creative, lively, aesthetically pleasing; the Semitic languages were mechanical, unregenerate, merely passive. From this typology Schlegel, and later Renan, went on to generalize about the great difference separating a superior Aryan and a non-Aryan mind, culture, and society.

Still another taxonomy was cultural-anthropological, and it was based on distinctions made by travellers, jurists, and colonial administrators. This system of classification purported to be based on scientifically verifiable information. There were, on the one hand, advanced and civilized cultures, and, on the other, backward, uncivilized cultures. A civilized man, it was believed, could cultivate the land, breed useful arts and crafts, create, accomplish, build. To him land was useful and productive, whereas for the uncivilized society land was either farmed badly or it was left to rot. From this doctrine, by which whole societies who lived on American and African and Asian territory for centuries were suddenly denied their right to live on that land, came the great dispossessing movements of modern European colonialism. In the doctrine of Robert Knox, set forth in The Dark Races, men were divided into white and advanced (the producers), and the dark, inferior wasters; in the doctrine of John Westlake and de Vaartel, territories were divided into empty (though inhabited) and civilized - and the former were then taken over on the basis of a higher right to them of the white European.

Millions of acres in Africa, Asia, and America were thus suddenly declared empty, their people and societies destroyed, their space just as suddenly filled with superior whites. Geographical societies in Europe during the 1870s mushroomed, as it was apparent that, in order to take territory, you had to explore it scientifically. Thus a marriage was made between modern science and imperialism whose consequence was untold catastrophe, human misery beyond count, oppression unlimited, disaster unqualified. Blacks, yellows, browns were declared non-people, their territory legislated away, their status by a stroke of the pen destroyed utterly. They were confined, as the Indians were confined, in reservations, or as blacks in Bantustans, as also during the same period women were confined to their homes, delinquents to prison, the insane to asylums and hospitals. For imperialism is not only conquest: it is also a system of confinement, and of hiding people declared unfit from history itself. As Lord Cromer said in 1908, the subject races must be governed - they must not be left to their own devices. All this was done and said in the name of science, culture, higher rationality.

Perhaps the best way I can illustrate now the condition of mind produced by imperialism is to quote from a letter of commendation written about 'Buffalo Bill' and his exploits in the American West:

As near as I can estimate there were in 1865 about nine and a half millions of buffaloes on the plains between the Missouri river and the Rocky Mountains; all are now gone - killed for their meat, their skins and bones.

This seems like desecration, cruelty, and murder, yet they have been replaced by twice as many neat cattle. At that date there were about 165,000 Pawnees, Sioux, Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Arapahoes, who depended on these buffaloes for their yearly food. They, too, are gone, and have been replaced by twice or thrice as many white men and women, who have made the earth to blossom as the rose, and who can be counted, taxed, and governed by the laws of nature and civilization. This change has been salutary, and will go on to the end. (Letter from General Sherman about Buffalo Bill)

Even Karl Marx in 1853, when he wrote about India and British colonialism, could not free himself from such thoughts as these when he said that, despite its cruelty, British colonialism would be good for the Indians

and turn them into modern people and free them from their Oriental backwardness. Similarly, the French poet Lamartine could travel in Palestine and Syria in 1833, see thousands of villages and people, and yet declare that he had visited land without people, territory without boundary, societies without reality.

These, then, are the principal characteristics of white European imperialism: (1) territorial expansion; (2) will to power over other societies; (3) classification of all nature and mankind into scientifically ethnocentric, discrete categories of advanced and backward, developed and underdeveloped, normal and delinquent, superior and inferior mentalities, societies, languages, species; (4) the rationalization of all these into juridical, territorial, racial, and social doctrines whose purpose was to cover outright conquest with a cloak of scientific and even humanitarian decency.

As to the question of Zionism, in most of the classifications to be found in nineteenth-century linguistics, anthropology, biology, and sociology, the Semites – that is, Arabs and Jews – were considered to be inferior. Now whereas it is true that Zionism arose as a response to anti-Semitism and to such flagrant dramas of racial injustice as the Dreyfus case, the early Zionists took from their European surroundings the form, the philosophy, the language, and the style of imperial thought about the territories of the East. Jewish financiers, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out, were already prominent in undertaking to support colonial projects (for example, Baron Hirsch and later the Rothschilds). Yet the Zionist project for Palestine was formulated in exactly the same terms that Britons, Frenchmen, Germans, Americans, and Russians had used for territorial expansion. The first Zionists turned to Palestine as Europeans turned to territories that were unilaterally declared empty and uncivilized. The native Arabs were considered either backward or non-existent. Jewish rights in Palestine were formulated in the juridical and even metaphysical of a powerful European imperialism, that had done the same thing in Tasmania, in south, east, west, and north Africa, and throughout Asia and America. The tragic blindness of Zionism lies in its having been born not only in the European oppression of the Jews, but amongst and as a part of the European oppression of black, yellow, brown, and red peoples. Zionism chose to ally itself not with the oppressed, but with the oppressors.

Thus the concept of a land without people is exactly analagous to Westlake's theory of unpopulated territory. The concept of Jewish labour (Avoda Ivrit) and of an unassimilated or separate European enclave in Asia is exactly analagous to Leopold de Sassure's theses on the necessity of maintaining a separate European and a native structure in newly-acquired territory. The concept of an unlimited Law of Return for Jews, and none for non-Jews, is based on the same thing to be found in every white colony in Asia, Africa, and America. Most important of all, the militant concept of a Jewish race derived itself not simply from the age-old persecution of Jews in Christian Europe, but from the racial typologies of Gobineau, Stewart Chamberlain, and Renan.

In theory and in practice, then, Zionism is a degraded repetition of European imperialism. As Marx said of Napoleon III, that he was a parody of his uncle Napoleon I, so too Zionism is a parody of European imperialism, as a nephew is to a greater uncle. Like imperialism, Zionism is a system of thought that governs - and infects - everything in the state whose ideology it is, from state institutions, to the question of who may or may not be a part of the Israeli basketball league, who may or may not be a Jew, who may or may not travel from point A to point B, who may or may not own land. Thus when we talk about Zionism and imperialism, we are talking about a family of ideas belonging to the same dynasty, springing out of the same seeds. And if, as niggers, Arabs, wops, gooks, slope-eyes, we have been declared scientifically unfit for human rights, it is now time for us together to expose and destroy the whole system of confinement, dispossession, exploitation, and oppression that still holds us down and denies us our inalienable rights as human beings. It is our job to create a genuine world culture of brotherhood and common cause. But in order to wage our struggle, we must first feel our chains, then we must understand them, then we must break them. And we must not allow ourselves to be bound again, least of all by chains of our own making.