



IDEAS IN CONTEXT

Imperial Sceptics

British Critics of Empire
1850–1920

GREGORY CLAEYS

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IMPERIAL SCEPTICS

Imperial Sceptics provides a highly original analysis of the emergence of opposition to the British Empire from 1850 to 1920. Departing from existing accounts, which have focused upon the Boer War and the writings of John Hobson, Gregory Claeys proposes a new chronology for the contours of resistance to imperial expansion. Claeys locates the impetus for such opposition in the late 1850s with the British followers of Auguste Comte. Tracing critical strands of anti-imperial thought through to the First World War, Claeys then scrutinises the full spectrum of socialist writings from the early 1880s onwards, revealing a fundamental division over whether a new conception of 'socialist imperialism' could appeal to the electorate and satisfy economic demands. Based upon extensive archival research, and utilising rare printed sources, *Imperial Sceptics* will prove a major contribution to our understanding of nineteenth-century political thought, shedding new light on theories of nationalism, patriotism, the state and religion.

GREGORY CLAEYS is Professor of the History of Political Thought at Royal Holloway, University of London. He has edited numerous works including *Late Victorian Utopias* (6 volumes, 2008) and *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010). He has published widely on aspects of the Owenite socialist movement, the French Revolution debate in Britain and the thought of Thomas Paine.

Imperial Sceptics

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Edited by David Armitage, Jennifer Pitts,
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IMPERIAL SCEPTICS

British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920

GREGORY CLAEYS

Royal Holloway, University of London



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This volume is respectfully dedicated to two men who, in very different ways, helped me to see another side: George S. Andrew Jr and Nguyen Ai Quoc.

Abbreviations

<i>AA</i>	<i>African Affairs</i>
<i>Add. MS</i>	British Library Additional Manuscript
<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>AJES</i>	<i>American Journal of Economics and Sociology</i>
<i>AJS</i>	<i>American Journal of Sociology</i>
<i>ASR</i>	<i>American Sociological Review</i>
<i>BJIS</i>	<i>British Journal of International Studies</i>
<i>BLPES</i>	British Library of Political and Economic Science
<i>BSSLH</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History</i>
<i>CHR</i>	<i>Canadian Historical Review</i>
<i>CR</i>	<i>Contemporary Review</i>
<i>DA</i>	<i>Derbyshire Advertiser</i>
<i>DR</i>	<i>Diplomatic Review</i>
<i>DUJ</i>	<i>Durham University Journal</i>
<i>EHR</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
<i>EJ</i>	<i>Economic Journal</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>The English Review</i>
<i>EW</i>	<i>Ethical World</i>
<i>FR</i>	<i>Fortnightly Review</i>
<i>H&T</i>	<i>History and Theory</i>
<i>HEI</i>	<i>History of European Ideas</i>
<i>HJ</i>	<i>Historical Journal</i>
<i>HPE</i>	<i>History of Political Economy</i>
<i>HPT</i>	<i>History of Political Thought</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>Historical Studies</i>
<i>HWJ</i>	<i>History Workshop Journal</i>
<i>IESHR</i>	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
<i>IHS</i>	<i>Irish Historical Studies</i>
<i>IISG</i>	International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam
<i>IJE</i>	<i>International Journal of Ethics</i>

ILP	Independent Labour Party
IRHPS	<i>International Review of History and Political Science</i>
IRSH	<i>International Review of Social History</i>
JAH	<i>Journal of African History</i>
JBS	<i>Journal of British Studies</i>
JCH	<i>Journal of Contemporary History</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Economic History</i>
JHI	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
JICH	<i>Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History</i>
JP	<i>Journal of Politics</i>
LL	<i>Labour Leader</i>
LPC	London Positivist Committee
LPS	London Positivist Society
MAC	Maison Auguste Comte
MAS	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
MG	<i>Manchester Guardian</i>
MH	<i>Midland History</i>
MRSPEs	<i>Monthly Record of the South Place Ethical Society</i>
NA	<i>New Age</i>
NC	<i>The Nineteenth Century</i>
NLS	National Library of Scotland
NR	<i>National Reformer</i>
P&P	<i>Past and Present</i>
PMG	<i>Pall Mall Gazette</i>
PR	<i>Positivist Review</i>
Prog. Rev.	<i>Progressive Review</i>
PSQ	<i>Political Science Quarterly</i>
RN	<i>Reynolds's Newspaper</i>
RP	<i>Review of Politics</i>
RRPE	<i>Review of Radical Political Economics</i>
S&S	<i>Science and Society</i>
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SPM	<i>South Place Monthly Magazine</i>
SPML	<i>South Place Monthly List</i>
SPMR	<i>South Place Monthly Review</i>
SR	<i>Sociological Review</i>
UCL	University College London
VS	<i>Victorian Studies</i>

*Introduction: audi alteram partem:
imperialism and the moral imagination*

ANTI-IMPERIALISM: THE STATE OF PLAY

This book focuses on the development of three issues in late nineteenth-century Britain: the emergence of explanations of the origin of the British empire; justifications for its continuation; and criticisms of its consequences. These questions were not initially perceived as being of earth-shattering importance. Indeed, Britons were famously described in 1883 by the historian Sir John Seeley as having acquired their overseas possessions ‘in a fit of absence of mind’. But others would come to disagree strenuously with this judgement. To one of our leading protagonists, the best-known critic of imperialism, John Hobson, the empire ‘was in actual history mainly the accumulation of quite clearly conceived pieces of political power, personal prestige, and trading profits. There was no absence of mind in the makers of its several parts, or even in the gradual bringing together and extension of these parts.’¹ Creating and enlarging the empire, in this view, had been in *someone’s* interest – in whose interest was what Hobson aimed to discern – if perhaps not the nation’s as a whole. And by the time Hobson intervened in this debate, during the Boer War, the nation’s mind had become very much concentrated on the issue.

Explaining and justifying this empire were, however, two different if interwoven tasks, while criticism was a still more distinctive matter. That there was some relationship between Britain’s commercial and financial system and imperial expansion had long been recognised.² By the 1820s political economists had become convinced that falling domestic rates of profit could be offset by more lucrative ventures abroad. ‘Surplus capital’, like Malthusian ‘surplus population’, wrote E. S. Cayley in 1830, ‘must seek

¹ John Seeley. *The Expansion of England* (1883), p. 8; J. A. Hobson. ‘Social Thinkers in Nineteenth-Century England’, *CR*, 137 (1930), 457. All works cited here were published in London unless otherwise noted.

² For a survey of the sources, see D. K. Fieldhouse. *The Theory of Capitalist Imperialism* (1967), pp. 2–44, and Anthony Webster. *The Debate on the Rise of the British Empire* (Manchester, 2006).

new countries; and by encouraging manufactures every where, may form the means of executing a design of Providence, that population should overspread every portion of the globe.' 'Colonies form the natural outlet both for the surplus capital and the redundant population of commercial states,' reiterated Archibald Alison in 1840, and the case was again reinforced by the economist J. E. Cairnes in 1864.³ If, however, as Hobson posited in 1902, self-interested financiers were not only at root responsible for imperialist aggression but equally its chief beneficiaries, maintaining the empire seemed scarcely defensible. If, in turn, a higher 'civilisational' mission could be posited, or some measure of mutual economic welfare delineated, a convincing rationale for expansion might well still be conceded. But if both the moral and economic consequences of empire appeared dubious, so did support for its continuance.

A growing number of individuals, gaining increasingly in prominence at the end of the century, were to reach the latter conclusion. Yet surprisingly, no study has attempted to assess the development of anti-imperialist ideas from the mid-nineteenth century until the end of the First World War. The pioneering analysis of very late Victorian attitudes, Bernard Porter's admirable *Critics of Empire* (1968), while still valuable, is relatively narrow in scope, hardly considers one of the main groups central to the present analysis, the Positivists, and offers little detail respecting another key set of players, the later Victorian and Edwardian socialists.⁴ Its account both of the origins of the explanation of empire, and especially the focus on finance capitalism, and of the emergence of stringent criticism of empire from a moral perspective, is accordingly limited.

A focus on the very late Victorian period, however, itself follows the logic of imperial expansion. In this epoch much of Africa and Asia were rapidly devoured by European conquerors. 'We must conquer or we must starve' had, according to one observer, become 'the latest gospel of Jingoism' by 1898. Peoples who stood in the way of plunder or settlement or who refused to submit to a capitalist work ethic were brusquely forced aside. 'Scientific' justification for such treatment was widely believed to have been furnished by Darwin's theory of natural selection, which in the vulgar doctrine of the 'survival of the fittest' seemingly excused even the extermination of many non-European peoples. Explanations of empire rooted in mass psychology, and what James Bryce termed the 'intensification of nationalistic pride and

³ E. S. Cayley. *On Commercial Economy* (1830), p. 34; Archibald Alison. *The Principles of Population* (2 vols., 1840), vol. I, p. 152; J. E. Cairnes. *Colonization and Colonial Government* (Dublin, 1864), pp. 300-1.

⁴ Bernard Porter. *Critics of Empire. British Radical Attitudes towards Colonialism in Africa 1895-1914* (1968).

national vanity', now became increasingly predominant.⁵ At home 'the people's ambition', observed the Frenchman Victor Bérard in 1906, was for 'an Imperial Britain to exploit the modern world as once did Imperial Rome'.⁶ As 'Greater Britain', in Sir Charles Dilke's memorable phrase, emerged, naysayers and doom-mongers were rudely brushed aside.⁷ With the Jubilee celebrations of 1897, the reconquest of the Sudan in 1898 and the Boer War of 1899, imperialist sentiment reached a crescendo of popular enthusiasm. In 1898 Cecil Rhodes proudly exulted that 'Little Englandism is now hopeless.'⁸ Just as 'Britain' had been recrafted through the assimilation of Ireland and Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as in colonising North America, British nationalism now swelled to fit an expansive new identity.⁹ This 'new type of patriotism', in John Mackenzie's words, was composed of 'a renewed militarism, a devotion to royalty, an identification with and worship of national heroes, together with a contemporary cult of personality, and racial ideas associated with Social Darwinism'.¹⁰ The new ideal may have compensated partly for something else that was being lost in the process of modernisation. The socialist Ernest Belfort Bax certainly thought so. Assessing 'The New Religion of the Possessing Classes', he asserted that the declining religious faith necessitated 'some substitute', which was 'gradually shaping in the form of modern "Patriotism", otherwise called "Imperialism", and by the profane "Jingoism"'. 'Patriotism is displacing the older Piety, with its bible of imperial history, its ritual worship of the flag, its commemorative saints'-days, its drill-processionals and its consecrated vestments,' Hobson agreed, with the 'mystical sentiments which formerly were directed towards a distant deity' being 'now claimed for the State and the social-economic order it seeks to ensure'. The Positivist sociologist Patrick Geddes, too, observed that 'theological rituals become patriotic ceremonies, the saluting of the flag replacing the attitude to prayer', with 'ancient nationalism' becoming 'the professional form of religion'.¹¹ Yet while most Britons

⁵ Lord Farrer. 'Does Trade Follow the Flag?', *CR*, 74 (1898), 810; James Bryce. *Essays and Addresses in Wartime* (1918), p. 131.

⁶ Victor Bérard. *British Imperialism and Commercial Supremacy* (1906), p. 44.

⁷ Charles Dilke. *Greater Britain* (3rd edn, 1869). The definitive study of the ideal is Duncan Bell's *The Idea of Greater Britain* (Princeton, 2007).

⁸ *NA* (28 Apr. 1898), 40.

⁹ The literature on this process is now considerable; a good starting-point is Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern, eds. *Empire and Others . . . 1600–1850* (1999).

¹⁰ John M. Mackenzie. *Propaganda and Empire . . . 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984), p. 2.

¹¹ *Justice* (9 Apr. 1914), 2; John Hobson. *Problems of a New World* (1921), p. 95; Geddes Papers, NLS, 10616, f. 114.

seem to have been complacent co-worshippers, happily assuming that they were destined to rule the world and that the glories of the British Way of Life were to be generously bestowed upon the grateful teeming millions, others disagreed. Every religion has its unbelievers. The quasi-religion of Empire, too, had its sceptics, to whom faith had to be juxtaposed to facts, and honest doubt proclaimed regardless of consequence. To many of these, as we will see throughout this book, the new religion was a self-destructive delusion, and perhaps ultimately threatened the very existence of the nation itself.

Existing accounts of anti-imperial sentiment view the critical moment of unsettling self-doubt as the protracted, bloody and deeply divisive war with the Boer Dutch settlers in southern Africa between 1899 and 1902. Britons now for the first time began widely to question the moral rectitude of imperial conquest as such. There now emerged, in Porter's description, a group of 'extreme anti-imperialists' who believed that 'Imperial expansion was morally wrong and the process must be reversed. The question of *how* to rule colonies was therefore an irrelevance . . . This was the Little Englander view, idealistic and impractical perhaps, but consistent and passionately adhered to.'¹² In 1902 a budding economist, John Atkinson Hobson, published *Imperialism: a Study*, which dissected the underlying causes of the war in terms of both an aggressively nationalist or 'jingoistic' desire – after the popular music-hall song of 1878 – for power and influence, and the need to acquire territories as markets and sources of investment for surplus capital. In A. J. P. Taylor's interpretation, Hobson 'did for Imperialism what Marx had done for capitalism itself: he showed that it sprang from inevitable economic causes, not from the wickedness of individuals'.¹³ Once the standard starting-point for discussions of both the explanation and critique of empire,¹⁴ Hobson's book is still often widely assumed to have assisted its dissolution in the decades following, and promoted the view that empire was morally indefensible and that cultural diversity is both inescapable and eminently desirable.¹⁵

Yet Hobson's role has also been disputed: was he greatly influential, or little read at all? Was he brilliantly innovative, or anticipated by earlier

¹² Porter. *Critics*, p. 2.

¹³ A. J. P. Taylor. *The Trouble-Makers* (1957), p. 100.

¹⁴ E.g., V. T. Harlow. *The Character of British Imperialism* (1939), p. 3; R. Koebner and H. D. Schmidt. *Imperialism: the Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840–1960* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 221–49.

¹⁵ See James Mayall. 'International Society and International Theory', in Michael Donelan, ed., *The Reason of States* (1978), p. 129, and generally Mayall. *Nationalism and International Society* (Cambridge, 1990), and James Tully. *Strange Multiplicity. Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge, 1997). In the classic account, the 'predominant motifs' of the 'first stage' of the

writers? Was he a leading anti-imperialist, or indeed not much of an opponent of empire as such? Of the antecedents of Hobson's analysis, the 'bondholder' hypothesis respecting the promotion of the invasion of Egypt in 1882 by rapacious financiers is most frequently mentioned.¹⁶ Here, it has been asserted, for 'the first time in British history it was the financial community rather than the soldiers or colonial officials who were held to be chiefly responsible for an act of imperial expansion'. Critics of the invasion, in Taylor's words, thus produced 'a landmark as the first, rather crude attempt to expose the financial basis of Imperialism'.¹⁷

The degree to which antagonism towards empire existed during much of the preceding epoch is, however, much less clear. Throughout the twentieth century historians quibbled as to just how strong antipathy towards expansion was throughout the Victorian period, and what its rationale and motives were. It is usually conceded that from the French Revolutionary wars there existed a 'dissenting' tradition in foreign policy, in Taylor's well-known term, associated initially with Charles James Fox's endorsement of nationalism in principle, as an ideal following on from the 'Rights of Man'. This tradition rejected great power chauvinism and plumped for a relative equality of states in the international sphere. Opponents of colonialism in the early nineteenth century are generally thought to have included some utilitarians, but not James Mill or various other later colonial 'reformers', who by the 1830s accepted that colonies might soak up surplus population.¹⁸ Free trade ideals subsequently were widely assumed to have implied an anti-colonial stance. If Britain 'were well quit of India', political economists like Nassau Senior argued, 'we should be much stronger than we are now. The difficulty is how to get well quit of it.'¹⁹ Leading colonial administrators reputed to have harboured similar reservations included Charles Buller, Lord Durham and William Molesworth. In mid-century the popular free trade doctrines of the Manchester School, as championed particularly by Richard Cobden and John Bright, also militated against foreign

emergence of economic imperialism 'were finally arranged into a system by J. A. Hobson' (Richard Koebner. 'The Concept of Economic Imperialism', *EHR*, 2, 1949, 6). See also D. K. Fieldhouse. "Imperialism": a Historiographical Revision', *EHR*, 14 (1961), 187–209.

¹⁶ See, e.g., A. J. Wilson. 'The Eleventh Plague of Egypt', *FR*, 32 (1882), 656–67, in which Britain's difficulties are ascribed to having 'taken the Egyptian bondholders under our protection'.

¹⁷ Roger Owen. 'Egypt and Europe: From French Expedition to British Occupation', in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds., *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (1972), p. 196; Taylor. *The Trouble-Makers*, p. 90.

¹⁸ A. G. L. Shaw. 'British Attitudes to the Colonies, c.1820–1850', *JBS*, 9 (1969), 71–95, and generally Klaus E. Knorr. *British Colonial Theories 1570–1870* (1944; repr. 1968).

¹⁹ Goldwin Smith. *Commonwealth or Empire* (1902), p. 68. See R. L. Schuyler. *The Fall of the Old Colonial System . . . 1770–1870* (Oxford, 1945), Donald Winch. *Classical Political Economy and the Colonies* (1965), and John Cunningham Wood. *British Economists and the Empire* (1983).

adventurism, and were supported by prominent liberal statesmen like Gladstone. The term 'imperialism' thus had a primarily negative connotation when it first began circulating in the late 1850s.²⁰ These, then, have usually been seen as the seeds of the later anti-imperialism of Hobson, a free trading Cobdenite radical whose moral tone was sharpened by Ruskinian humanism.²¹

The view, particularly as championed by Bodelsen, writing in 1924,²² that there was thus a substantially anti-imperial phase which lasted for much of the period between Waterloo and the rise of the new imperialism of the 1880s, was, however, gradually displaced from the mid-twentieth century onwards by the theory that this was in fact an era of muted opposition, at best, while continuing territorial expansion occurred.²³ If early twentieth-century commentators might recall that in the 1870s (before the phrase had been coined) 'every one was a "little Englander"',²⁴ there was, writers like Eldridge emphasised by the 1970s, no dominant 'aversion to empire' in the 1860s.²⁵ Opponents of expansion did of course exist. In the early 1850s Disraeli had written privately that the 'wretched colonies' were a 'millstone round our necks'. Repeated references occur as to the desirability of 'cutting the painter' of the more mature, settled colonies, especially New Zealand, Canada and the Cape of Good Hope, notably in the later 1860s.²⁶ As late as 1870 Gladstone was still identified with a 'little England' disdain for retaining the colonies.²⁷ And some later historians still echoed the view that in 'the 1860s the Little Englanders certainly held the field'.²⁸ But colonial

²⁰ Koebner. 'The Concept of Economic Imperialism'; Koebner and Schmidt. *Imperialism*, p. 1. F. H. Hinsley places its first use in English around 1858 (*Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, Cambridge, 1963, p. 248). On the range of meanings the term later conveyed, see Andrew S. Thompson. 'The Language of Imperialism ... 1895-1914', *JBS*, 36 (1997), 147-77.

²¹ This is assumed, for instance, in A. P. Thornton. *The Imperial Idea and its Enemies* (1959).

²² C. A. Bodelsen. *Studies in Mid-Victorian Imperialism* (Copenhagen, 1924). A good survey of the debate is Ged Martin. 'Anti-Imperialism in the Mid-Nineteenth Century and the Nature of the British Empire, 1820-1870', in Ronald Hyam and Ged Martin, *Reappraisals in British Imperial History* (1975), pp. 88-120.

²³ For the older view see, e.g., R. L. Schuyler. 'The Climax of Anti-Imperialism in England', *PSQ*, 36 (1921), 537-60, which sees this being reached during the 1860s, and Rita Hinden. *Empire and After* (1949), pp. 53-63. See also B. A. Knox. 'Reconsidering Mid-Victorian Imperialism', *JICH*, 1 (1972-3), 155-72.

²⁴ Brougham Villiers. *England and the New Era* (1920), p. 240. Asquith claimed that the phrase 'Little Englander' had been invented by W. T. Stead, c.1884 (*Fifty Years of Parliament*, 1926, p. 270).

²⁵ C. C. Eldridge. *England's Mission: the Imperial Idea ... 1868-80* (1973), p. 38. See, e.g., [Henry Thring]. *Suggestions for Colonial Reform* (1865), p. 12.

²⁶ Earl of Malmesbury. *Memoirs of an Ex-Minister* (2 vols., 1884), vol. I, p. 344; Julius Vogel. 'Greater or Lesser Britain', *NC*, 1 (July 1877), 810-12.

²⁷ Harlow. *The Character of British Imperialism*, p. 27.

²⁸ Richard Gott. 'Little Englanders', in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism. The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (3 vols., 1989), vol. I, p. 96.

'reformers', it is now more often conceded, generally sought cheaper and more efficient government rather than 'separation'.²⁹ Many who thought that some colonies might well desire independence also still saw them as potential partners in 'a common and mighty Empire'.³⁰ Utilitarians, too, became increasingly viewed as possessing a more pronounced imperial agenda.³¹ Free trade itself came to be perceived as a form of imperialism. 'Little England' thus came to be seen as passing quickly out of currency as a description of attitudes towards empire in the mid-nineteenth century, dismissed as 'always a term of derision levelled at political opponents' rather than anything resembling a positive ideal (dangerous word, 'always', for a historian to use; we will soon see why it is inappropriate here).³² The mid-Victorian years, thus, witnessed less 'an anti-imperialist climate of opinion', as John Strachey once described it,³³ than an oscillation between positive and negative images of the empire, mingled with a fair amount of simple disinterest.³⁴

This book proposes to amend these accounts of anti-imperialism in seven ways. Firstly, it offers a new chronology for understanding the ideas which compose the concept. Many studies, such as Etherington's *Theories of Imperialism*, commence with Hobson, or at least with Hobson's most direct or supposed sources.³⁵ Porter's *Critics of Empire* similarly focuses on Hobson and *fin-de-siècle* debates.³⁶ Another important assessment, Thornton's *The Imperial Idea and its Enemies* (1959), equally offers little insight into the aims and achievements of the main groups studied here.³⁷ This book ends rather than beginning with Hobson, and attempts to define a much wider pre-existing spectrum of thought for contextualising his contribution to the debate than has been identified previously. Liberal and radical critics of imperial policy, however, who have been more carefully studied previously,

²⁹ See, e.g., W. P. Morrell. *British Colonial Policy in the Age of Peel and Russell* (Oxford, 1930), p. 472.

³⁰ W. E. Forster. *Our Colonial Empire* (1875), p. 5.

³¹ A recent survey is Bart Schultz and Georgios Varouxakis, eds., *Utilitarianism and Empire* (2005).

³² Eldridge. *England's Mission*, p. 31. On free trade imperialism see R. Robinson and J. Gallagher. 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *EHR*, 6 (1953), 1–15, and Bernard Semmel. *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism . . . 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1970). One well-known response is Oliver MacDonagh. 'The Anti-Imperialism of Free Trade', *EHR*, 14 (1962), 489–501.

³³ John Strachey. *The End of Empire* (1959), p. 72.

³⁴ So concludes Miles Taylor. "'Imperium et Libertas'? Rethinking the Radical Critique of Imperialism during the Nineteenth Century", *JICH*, 19 (1991), 17.

³⁵ Norman Etherington. *Theories of Imperialism* (1984), pp. 40–83.

³⁶ E.g., Porter. *Critics*, pp. 158–9.

³⁷ Bernard Semmel's *The Liberal Ideal and the Demons of Empire* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 42–6, provides an account of Comte's views, but not of their influence in Britain.

particularly in relation to Parliament, do not enter substantially into the narrative here.

Secondly, the account presented here chronicles the centrality of Positivism's contribution to this debate from the early 1850s onwards. Ten Positivists produced more anti-imperial writing in this period than as many thousand socialists. Their attack on 'Big Englandism' effectively began with the Indian Mutiny and accelerated just as Disraeli proclaimed the new glories of empire.³⁸ By the late 1850s the British Positivists had adopted a moral stance respecting international relations which came closer to rejecting imperialism in principle than any other group. Their views were to prove considerably more influential than their small numbers suggest, but have been substantially neglected.

Thirdly, this book details the socialist contribution to anti-imperialist thought. It contends that pro-imperial attitudes were much more widespread amongst socialists than is usually assumed, to the degree that 'socialist imperialism' may be described as a leading trend in the early twentieth century. Indisputably, some socialists were 'Little Englanders' whose sympathies led them to abjure further expansion, and to commend speedy independence to existing imperial possessions. Others, however, and not merely the Fabians, who have previously been cast nearly alone in the (villainous) role, openly proclaimed themselves 'socialist imperialists', asserting that Britain had a special 'civilising mission' as well as an economic right and even obligation to develop the natural resources of those deemed incapable of doing so themselves. Many understood such goals in terms of creating a 'Socialist Commonwealth', where capitalist exploitation would be supplanted by a more co-operative and protective approach to both native peoples and their resources. This would be the view eventually adopted, if with some ambiguity, by much of the Labour Party by the mid-1920s. This means that the term 'anti-imperialism' must be used advisedly: those who were sceptical about the existing empire did not necessarily reject the concept *tout court*, and were sometimes happy to hedge their bets. We will see, too, that socialist debates about imperialism were intimately interwoven with often fierce disagreements about the compatibility of socialism and nationalism, and the forms which socialist cosmopolitanism and internationalism ought rightly to assume.

Fourthly, this book reassesses the issue of motivation in the emergence of anti-imperial ideas, laying stress upon the importance of religious as well as secular sources of a growing toleration of non-Christian societies, as well as

³⁸ See Frederic Harrison. 'Big Englandism', *PR*, 8 (June 1900), 97–101.

of allegiance to a higher ideal of 'humanity'. It contends that for the Positivists, as well as prominent critics like Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and Annie Besant, religion provided an important means of identifying with non-Europeans, and according them a much greater respect than most contemporaries willingly extended. Even Hobson, normally treated as a resolutely 'secular' figure in this regard, can be shown to have been sympathetic to the need to conceive of a higher human obligation in quasi-religious terms.

Fifthly, this study re-examines the origins of the explanation of imperialism usually associated with Hobson, that the imperative of profitable investment of capital abroad because of the declining rate of profit at home led to a collusion between finance capital and government. It links this account to Positivist writing about India in the early 1870s, and less controversially, with the 1882 invasion of Egypt in particular, and demonstrates the centrality of this event to the development of pre-existing criticisms of empire.

Sixthly, it asks a series of questions about how Britain was imagined in a post-imperial state: about what, in other words, 'Little England' might look like as a positive ideal, no 'mere negation', but a conception of a 'healthy commonwealth' juxtaposed to empire.³⁹ In large measure, we will see, this ideal comprised a more self-sufficient, agriculturally independent, partly deindustrialised conception of the nation in which priority was given to domestic consumption over foreign trade, to bolstering home demand by promoting greater social equality, and to reducing bloated conurbations to entities where social bonds might still flourish. This 'civic' ideal, too, hostile to large states in principle, urging a commensurate stress upon duties rather than rights and upon the social rather than the individual nature of most forms of property, was shared by Positivists, some socialists, and by Hobson, and constitutes a core communitarian political assumption at the heart of much anti-imperialist thought.

Finally, the book concludes by linking this debate briefly to proposals for international government and limiting national sovereignty which culminated in an intense debate during the First World War. The pre-history of the League of Nations lies in part in anti-imperialist debates over the preceding half-century and more, and not solely in the wartime realisation of the catastrophic consequences of the system of great power alliances. My stopping point here is in part dictated by the fact that existing scholarship is much richer and more nuanced on the post-1918

³⁹ 'The Little Englander', *Monthly Review*, 2 (Jan. 1901), 11, 13, 18.

period.⁴⁰ But it is usually recognised that this was a definitive moment in international relations at many levels. For the late, leading historian of international relations, F. H. Hinsley, 1919 ended the era when the international system was dominated by ‘the rule of force’.⁴¹ Others see here a ‘utopian’ moment when international relations seemed susceptible of being placed on a much more humane and harmonious footing.⁴² For Britons the ‘end of empire’ began partly with creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, the Union of South Africa in 1910, the Government of India Act of 1919, which permitted partial self-government at the provincial level, and the formation of the Irish Free State in 1921.⁴³ While the idea of self-determination or the right of nations to self-government emerged during the French Revolution, when it was yoked to that of popular sovereignty, it only became a viable concept in the ‘Wilsonian’ moment at the end of the First World War.⁴⁴ And yet, as we will see, when so much seemed to be promised, so little was delivered. The recognition of such demands for national self-determination was still widely assumed to be confined to European or ‘civilised’ peoples engulfed in pan-European empires like Austro-Hungary. Britain and France in particular seem to have felt that renewed exploitation of their empires could help to offset the devastation and expense of the war. This book is in a sense haunted by the image of one enduring symbol of this disappointment who stands for many others whose hopes were similarly dashed, an anguished young patriot, Nguyen Ai Quoc, who solicited help for the cause of Vietnamese nationalism in Paris at the end of the First World War, and found precious little.

THE TWO DEBATES IN FOREIGN AND COLONIAL POLICY

To set the stage briefly for this story we need to consider how Britons in this period saw other nations generally, and their own expanding empire in particular. Ideas about empire are also ideas about the relations between states, and as such part of what is now often termed international political

⁴⁰ See, most notably, Stephen Howe. *Anticolonialism in British Politics . . . 1918–1964* (Oxford, 1993).

⁴¹ F. H. Hinsley. *Nationalism and the International System* (1973), p. 141.

⁴² See, e.g., Trevor Taylor. ‘Utopianism’, in Steve Smith, ed., *International Relations* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 92–107.

⁴³ See, e.g., John Darwin. *The End of the British Empire* (Oxford, 1991), p. xiii.

⁴⁴ See generally A. Rigo Sureda. *The Evolution of the Right of Self-Determination* (Leiden, 1973), pp. 17–24. Earlier accounts include Alfred Cobban. *National Self-Determination* (Oxford, 1944), and John Plamenatz. *On Alien Rule and Self-Government* (1960).

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