

Internationalist at work

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*Written in 2011 as the
Foreword to Spokesman's
new edition of J. A.
Hobson's influential
classic, Imperialism: A
Study, the Leader of the
Labour Party surveys a
long history.*

J A Hobson wrote his great tome in a different age. His thoughts were dominated by the zenith of the British Empire and the Boer War. The outcome of the war demonstrated Britain's then ability in sustaining global reach, since Elizabethan times, but also its extreme vulnerability. At home the poor physique of working class soldiers led to Haldane's investigation into working class health and living conditions. The difficulty in containing the rebellious Boers, and the huge opposition to the war, encouraged further doubts about the whole Empire project.

What was remarkable was that Hobson wrote *Imperialism* at the end of the scramble for Africa in which Britain had gained enormous tracts of land, and Rhodes was busying himself with the Cape to Cairo railway project. The most cynical of western manoeuvres, the Congress of Berlin in 1884, had agreed on the lines on the map, which largely still exist and have been the cause of endless wars and the loss of many lives.

What is interesting is the way in which Hobson contrasts the 'new' African Empire and global reach that Britain had finally gained for itself with the two earlier editions of Britain's empire. The American Empire had collapsed in the eighteenth century, when the thirteen colonies rebelled and finally gained their independence; British efforts to re-take them were unsuccessful. Even despite the US Civil War, the new power over the water was now almost as great as the old imperial powers of France, Britain and Spain.

In effect, Hobson accepts that America had gone, and that the analysis should be

looking at the dilemma between the 'real' British Empire in India and the new one in Africa and scattered islands across the oceans.

For someone who was revered by Marxists, and quoted by Lenin, for his analysis of the pressures to extend empire, his analysis of the then current Empire, and its future, was not very revolutionary. What is brilliant, and very controversial at the time, is his analysis of the pressures that were hard at work in pushing for a vast national effort in grabbing new outposts of Empire on distant islands and shores. His painstaking analysis of the costs, and the alleged benefits, of Empire is very powerful.

Pages of trade statistics show how the vast military spending on naval escorts, army postings and the human costs of wars had made little difference to Britain's trade in comparison to those countries who had little or no overseas places but successfully traded. The characterisation of the political and commercial interests that fed the cause of new empire is almost a parallel for our times. Then, as now, the popular press presented a general view of British superiority over the rest of the world, which effectively opened a space for the unholy alliance of an ambitious military high command and huge commercial interests. This created opportunities for arms manufacturers, business for shipping companies, and protected closed markets for British companies. It was also the mainstay of what had become traditional British industries such as cotton. Thousands of people were working in mills all across Lancashire and Yorkshire making products from raw materials which were imported over thousands of miles, and exported in reverse over the same routes.

What is attractive is Hobson's ability to separate and disassemble the interests of the commercial and imperial aims. He makes the valid point that other European countries, without the benefit of empires, manage to be successful trading and industrial powers in their own right.

Hobson's railing against the commercial interests that fuel the role of the popular press with tales of imperial might, that then lead on to racist caricatures of African and Asian peoples, was both correct and prescient. The way in which the British press portrayed Ghandi in the 1930s, or Kenyatta in the 1950s or, indeed, Argentina's soldiers and sailors in the 1980s shows the tricks have not changed dramatically.

The other relationship that has not changed at all is the link of these interests to the supposed national interest and the parroting of prejudices in Parliament. From John Bull and Cecil Rhodes in the nineteenth century, the khaki politicians who encouraged thousands to their deaths in 1914, and then the later colonial and imperial wars, the cynical manipulation has continued. Indeed, as with previous wars, there were deliberate media and

political attempts to denigrate whole peoples in the run up to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hobson's comments in Chapter V when he says that

'the increased hostility of foreign nations towards us in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century may be regarded as entirely due to the aggressive imperialism of those years ...'

are a clear assertion of the real process that was taking place. This is followed by a table of costs that demonstrates how colonial trade rose from £184 millions in 1884 to £232 millions in 1903, but that arms costs went from £27 millions to £123 millions in 1902. This vast expenditure, a four-fold rise in eighteen years, (partly occasioned by the Boer War) encouraged the intensity of the growing arms race and colonial competition between Britain and Germany.

Hobson describes the way that the conglomeration of Army and Naval Officers, serving and retired, media opinion formers, and the whole retinue of manufacturers and arms dealers created a juggernaut that cost the nation, and ultimately, the world, dear.

In Chapter VII of his book Hobson develops a thesis that, to me, is strange, and at variance with the general analysis he presents against empire. He discusses the issues of organisation and activity of an empire and seems to be heading, in part, in the direction of some kind of Anglo Saxon Empire. This was long before the French idea of Overseas Departments and a global empire based on the cultural norms of the mother country. In this section Hobson makes some very prescient comments on the cultural identity and power of both India and China. Now emerging as the two most populous nations in the world and of ever increasing importance. In 1902, neither was united as a nation, both were wholly or partly occupied and controlled by European powers. His analysis was based on the obvious issues of population and resources, but also on the understanding of the colonial and technical traditions of both countries. China was clearly the most pre-eminent power for most of the past millennium and is now, in reality, returning to the technical pre-eminence it enjoyed before the European industrial revolutions.

What Hobson also observed was the growing industrial and imperial power of China; expansion and casting an eye towards the Pacific. In very prescient observations he saw military rivalry with the United States. Forty years later, a vicious conflict was in full swing between the USA and Japan in World War Two.

Reading Hobson's works now, at the end of the first decade of the

twenty-first century, and acknowledging all that has happened in the huge sweep of imperial and post-colonial history, he deserves enormous credit and recognition. At his time of writing the British Empire was at its zenith, as were the French and German Empires. The European powers were feeling very pleased with themselves, having divided Africa amongst themselves at the Congress of Berlin in 1884. They also accepted the Monroe Doctrine, which gave the United States the whip hand over the former Spanish colonies of Latin America. US power, already huge, and its armed forces, soon to become more than a match for the Europeans, were honed from their domestic arms race in the Civil War. Active in aggression and occupation in Mexico, Cuba, the Philippines, their forces were ideally equipped for their initially reluctant participation in the Great War.

The Europeans, meanwhile, were concerning themselves with the challenge of the declining Ottoman Empire. National competition, huge leaps in arms technology, and nationalist rhetoric encouraged the descent into the abyss of the First World War. The millions who died in the trenches and mud of the Western Front laid down their lives for each other's empires. The whole allied edifice came crashing down when Russia withdrew, following the revolution, the Germans surrendered, and faced the arrogance of the victorious allies in Versailles.

The complexities of Versailles are often presented as the end of Empire but were, in fact, a change of gear and approach whilst preserving the colonial sensitivities of Britain and France. The German colonies were divided up between the victorious powers, while the Ottoman Empire was divided into the now notorious 'mandates'. Woodrow Wilson and his 'fourteen points' were the high point of articulation of then American liberal thinking, but tinged with more than a nod towards rapidly developing industrial and military US power.

Even as the great powers were humiliating Germany at Versailles and sharing out the spoils of war, they were united in detestation of the nascent Soviet Union. An alliance of all the victorious powers was equipping the Tsarist forces and fighting the Red Army. The Soviet Union survived, and expelled those forces as huge workers' risings were taking place in Europe, particularly in Germany.

The era of traditional empire was over, but was imperial thinking? Britain and France clung on to their colonial possessions with increasing difficulty and inability to pay for the rising military cost of subjecting people in revolt against the notion of distant European control of their lives. Both countries indulged in grand self-delusions of huge buildings such as Lutyens' palaces in New Delhi and attempts at uniting the empire

with new shipping and airlines. Astonishingly, at a time of depression and rapid economic decline at home, Imperial Airways was presented as a step forward; there were massive Empire Day festivities and grand royal tours of the Empire.

The costs of World War Two and the loss of prestige of the European colonialists did not prevent Britain, France and The Netherlands attempting to re-take their 'possessions' in Asia from the Japanese and return to the 1930s. In the case of Vietnam and Indonesia, this was done with the enlisted support of surrendered and then conscripted Japanese soldiers.

Suspicion of Britain and France's role in their colonies temporarily fuelled American suspicions of a war to re-create empires. Britain was forced into independence of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947 and the catastrophic partition into India and Pakistan. France lost the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and was thus forced out of Indochina. Colonial wars followed but, by the end of the 1960s, European empires in the sense of colonial possessions were over.

Empires collapse from a combination of factors, principally the difficulty of governing and sustaining a regime at a distance, but also from opposition to the whole notion of empire at home. The two pre-eminent European colonial powers of the twentieth century, Britain and France, both had enormous confusions on the Left about empire. Both countries had been through political revolution, which was immediately followed by racial and political acts of contradiction to the supposed ethics of the new forces. Cromwell, having defeated the monarchist forces in the Civil War in 1648, invaded and occupied Ireland in unparalleled brutality and savagery. The uprising of black slaves in Haiti, in 1798, was brutally repressed by French forces sent by Napoleon in the name of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

In a sense, that confusion and contradiction remained with the British Left who supported Empire Free Trade and dominion status in the 1920s. Elements of the French Left initially supported the war against independence for Algeria in the 1950s.

In many ways the military disaster of the Suez adventure in 1956, when Britain and France tried to prevent Egypt from nationalising the Suez Canal, was the end of their empires. The United States and the Soviet Union became the big poles in the globe and, in their own ways, developed empires of ideology and economy.

Since World War Two, the big imperial force has been the United States on behalf of global capitalism and the biggest, mostly US-based

corporations. The propaganda for this has presented itself as a voice for 'freedom' and carefully and consciously conflated it with market economics.

The 1949 Congress for Cultural Freedom in Amsterdam was the European opening to accompany the military re-occupation under the guise of NATO. Thus, the Cold War was followed by American media and cultural values, in an attempt to create an empire of the mind. The hard power of their weaponry, the malign influence of the CIA, and its creation of pliant and friendly governments, actively suppressed and subjugated peoples in the poorest counties of the world.

The influence of the Soviet Union around the world was huge, but tempered by an inadequate industrial base in comparison to the United States and the ruinously expensive arms race that hastened its decline, and eventual collapse in 1991. But the Soviet influence was always different, and its allies often acted quite independently. Cuba, desperately dependent on Soviet support for its survival in the 1960s through to the 1980s, developed a quite independent foreign policy and enormous respect and stature amongst the poorest people, particularly in Latin America.

What the Cubans and, in particular, Che Guevara were preaching in the 1960s has an even greater resonance today in the Left of Latin America. The popular socialist movements of Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela owe much to his vision. The Bolivarian alliance, with its economic and social justice requirements, represents a challenge and appeal that the traditional Monroe Doctrine of military power accompanied by global capital cannot match at all.

If the US has problems in Latin America, it has far greater problems in relation to Islam and its behaviour around the world. Like all empires, the excessive use of natural resources and huge costs of its military create the paradigms of decline and collapse. The US has, since the end of World War Two, sought access to markets and materials. Challenged by OPEC in the 1970s, it has desperately tried to control and hang on to influence in the Middle East. Some of this thinking led to the wars in Iraq in 1990 and 2003.

Bush and Blair's assertion of the War on Terror in 2001 had as much to do with economic interests as any notion of 'security'.

Afghanistan, the longest lasting US military involvement apart from Vietnam, is fuelled by notions of security and assertion of military power, but also of the huge unexploited mineral reserves. The irony of Afghanistan is that the unsuccessful attempts by the western counties to occupy and control will probably lead to Chinese mineral extraction to fuel

their industries. It would bring a wry smile to Hobson, who long predicted the rise of China at the expense of the western powers.

The huge issues facing the world are of unprecedented shortages of raw materials, food and land coupled with enormous military expenditure and a huge gulf between the richest and poorest. A sixth of the world's population are permanently hungry, the same number again are politely described as 'food insecure', whilst the ominous issues of over development, water shortages and loss of ecology, and thus sustainability, mount up.

Free market capitalism cannot provide for everyone, or sustain the natural world. Its very imperative is of ever hastening exploitation of all resources including people, and it needs armies and weapons to secure those supplies. The political appeal, unchallenged in the 1990s, of this concept is fast fading by a combination of Islamic opposition and the radical popular movements of landless and poor peoples in many poor countries. Increasingly, these movements also have a resonance in the cities of the industrial countries as well.

All empires asserted themselves by technology. The Greek and Persian Empires by language and communications, the Romans by settlement, efficient armies and technology of agriculture and craft. The huge empires of China were technologically well in advance of any other for several centuries. Despite not having the use of the wheel, horses or steam power, the American empires of Aztec, Inca and Maya could dominate and control through advanced technology of building and communications, and, of course, disciplined forces.

The brutality of European expansion from the sixteenth century was based on superior weaponry and industry, and the waging of a permanent cultural war both at home and in the occupied lands. The racist stereotyping of peoples by the Europeans allowed the slave trade to develop and prosper. It enabled the most appalling degradation of subjected peoples to take place and pour untold wealth into pockets of the merchant classes in the cities of Britain and Europe.

Culture is an important part of empire, as is source of knowledge and understanding of history. All countries encourage a very nationalist form of history teaching, and from that stems racism and perverted feelings of superiority.

Technology cannot be monopolised any longer, nor communication really be brought under control. The whole world has realised the lack of emperors' clothes through Wikileaks; the honesty of the imperial masters in the global market place is now forever under scrutiny.

However, the wars and conflict are about poverty and hunger and the competition of the powerful for resources. Thus, big corporations, with the support of national governments, grab land in the poorest counties to supply food and fuel for the future. Desperately poor people in Kenya and Guatemala watch as land is fenced in and luscious genetically modified crops are produced and flown out to feed the well-fed on overnight flights.

Migrant flows of people in desperate search of work and life occur all over the world; at any one time there are probably 200 million people on the move in search of a sustainable life. These people, the most exploited, are the Fourth World who travel and hope and try and survive, but often die on roads and railway lines, in seas and in poverty.

Western countries in Europe and the United States are finding they do not really control their own economies, that the contradictions of global capital are bigger than they are. They also realise that none of the world's institutions can really control anything. The United Nations, long seen as a hope for peace and order, has such limited power and resources it can only proclaim, not control any situation.

The wars that are now being fought are of ideas and economic power. The free market model cannot sustain or succeed; the more collectivist approach of the Non-Aligned Movement, and assertion of the needs of the poorer countries of the world, does provide hope.

However, the denial of individual and collective rights, opportunities for women, and the increasing polarisation between rich and poor contain the seeds of conflicts to come. The writings of Arundhati Roy, as a voice for the voiceless and oppressed, are as prescient for the future as any.

Hobson proclaimed against the absurdity and inadequacy of empire. In this era we need sustainability and justice. Neither is possible in an ideology committed to aggrandisement of wealth. A century ago, Hobson analysed the motive force of Empire in an era of uniforms, deference and unnecessary respect for power and authority. That ideology has been replaced by an obsession with money and exploitation, and it is just as pernicious and equally dangerous for the future.