

Topic 6.1

Rationales for Imperialism from 1750 to 1900

You Will Learn To:

- Identify and describe different ways empires justified imperialism.

Between 1750 and 1900, European states' imperialist rivalries centered on control of African and Asian territories for resources that fueled industrialization. As the competition for resource-rich foreign territories intensified, Europeans justified their colonial expansion with:

- their alleged duty to "civilize" native populations they considered "savage."
- Social Darwinism, a racist application of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.
- claims that Christian missions and their schools helped civilize Africans.
- nationalist claims that imperialism increased state prestige and promoted economic interests.

Justifying imperialism

The civilizing mission

After arriving in Africa, European empires justified their actions by claiming to civilize natives through Western cultural and technological advances. For example, the British Crown mandated that the Royal Niger Company respect natives' customs, except those that Europeans considered barbarous, including human sacrifice and cannibalism.

The British mandate reflected the "White Man's Burden" —an alleged responsibility to civilize those deemed "inferior" or "savage" in less-developed societies.



"John Bull's civilizing mission"

Social Darwinism

The mission to civilize "savages" was reflected in Social Darwinism, a belief derived from Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection. However, British philosopher Herbert Spencer misappropriated the Darwinian concept of "survival of the fittest" to explain social and economic inequalities.

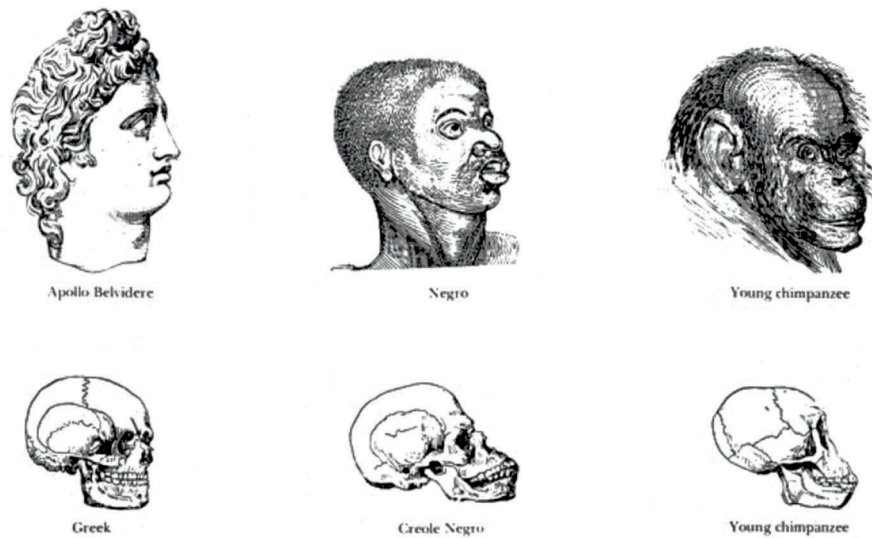


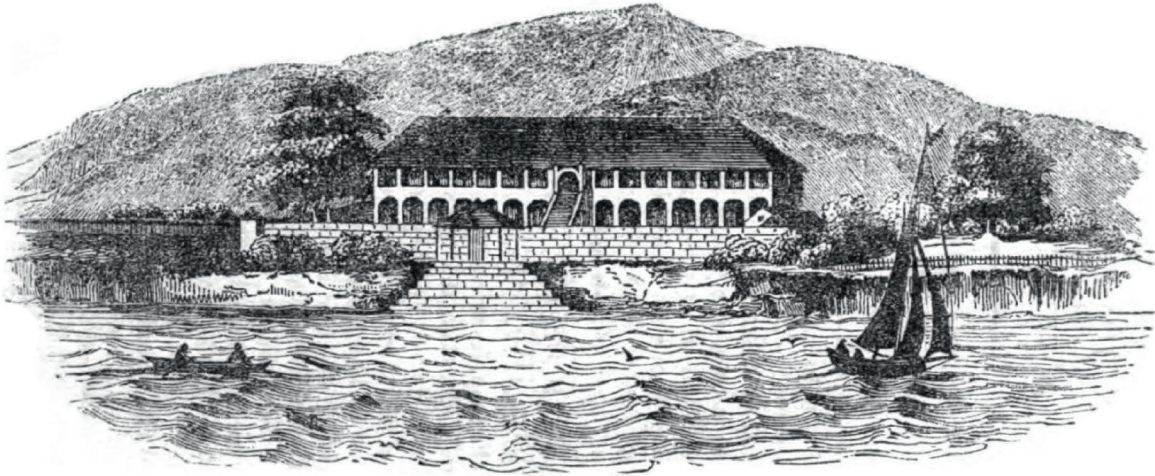
Illustration from J. C. Nott and G. R. Gliddon, *Indigenous Races of the Earth* (United States, 1868).

In Spencer's view, people who prosper and ascend in the social hierarchy possess abundant moral, social, and physical attributes necessary for survival. Consequently, for imperialists, Spencer's theory supported European colonial dominance because it used Europeans' supposed evolutionary advantages to justify colonizers subjugating less-developed societies.

Religious justifications

Catholic and Protestant missionaries led efforts to eradicate native cultures by establishing religious societies. Western-style schools were built within these societies to teach natives the colonizers' language and customs.

In the 1800s, the British government circulated the idea that spreading Christianity was a moral duty and that a Christian education would help civilize natives.



School in Sierra Leone founded by the Wesleyan Missionary Society
(British Methodists), 1846

As a part of this duty, the British government provided grants to Christian missionary schools, which helped justify Britain's colonial presence. Consequently, supporting Christian missionaries became a part of a broader imperialist strategy that expanded the British Empire's power and influence worldwide.



RAROTONGA; THE MISSIONARY'S WELCOME.

Nationalism

In the 1800s, British officials believed imperialist policies increased the empire's prestige by civilizing colonial subjects, such as those in Africa, the Caribbean, and India. Imperialists also understood that

colonies' military benefits—including serving as naval stations that commanded shipping lanes—increased state prestige as well, deepening British citizens' sense of nationalism.



European powers also held that imperialist policies generated economic benefits, as the policies enabled access to natural resources and opened new markets to European trade. For example, after the Berlin Conference, Belgian leaders asserted that colonizing the Congo improved Belgium's economic position among European states, which deepened Belgians' national pride.



King Leopold II of Belgium, depicted as a rubber vine entangling a Congolese rubber collector

Things to remember

Between 1750 and 1900, states justified imperialism by claiming:

- they bore the "burden" of civilizing "savage" peoples in less-developed societies.
- Social Darwinism proved that Europeans' evolutionary advantages gave colonizers the right to dominate less-developed societies.
- it was their moral duty to spread Christianity to Africans and provide them with a Christian education.
- imperialist policies increased states' prestige and strengthened their economies, thus deepening citizens' national pride.

6.1 Check for Understanding

1. **The so-called "White Man's Burden" was most centered on which of the following justifications for imperialism?**
 - A. Nationalist goals
 - B. Civilizing natives
 - C. Religious conversions
2. **According to Western leaders, Social Darwinism justified European nations' imperialist goals and actions because it proved that**
 - A. Europeans' evolutionary advantages gave them the right to colonize.
 - B. Christianity was the one true faith, driving Europeans' need to colonize.
 - C. Africa had an abundance of natural resources that Western industries required.
3. **At times, European nations' imperialist goals were aided by Catholic and Protestant missionaries who**
 - A. syncretized traditional African beliefs and Christianity.
 - B. donated church offerings directly to their governments.
 - C. established religious societies in their empires' colonies.