

Setting the Terms of the Debate

Science, the State, and the “New Imperialism”

IN ONE OF HIS FIRST major speeches after becoming secretary of state for the colonies in 1895, Joseph Chamberlain, the one-time Radical mayor from Birmingham, announced at Walsall that

Great Britain, the little centre of a vaster Empire than the world has ever seen, owns great possessions in every part of the globe, and many of those possessions are still unexplored, entirely undeveloped. What would a great landlord do in a similar case with a great estate? We know perfectly well, if he had the money, he would expend some of it, at any rate, in improving the property, in making communications, in making outlets for the products of his land, and that, it seems to me, is what a wealthy country ought to do with regard to these territories which it is called upon to control and govern. That is why I am an advocate of the extension of Empire.¹

By the time Chamberlain made this declaration he had become one of the greatest exponents of the fin-de-siècle drive for European overseas

expansion and conquest in Africa and Asia. The seemingly limitless possibilities opened up by the recent penetration of the African continent and other tropical regions inspired many prominent explorers, philanthropists, businessmen, and political leaders in various European countries to urge their governments to, as King Leopold of Belgium put it, claim their piece of this magnificent African cake.

Chamberlain began his parliamentary career in the 1870s as a Liberal MP under William Gladstone and quickly rose to become leader of the party's Radical wing. The Radical program aimed to transform Britain into a popular middle-class democracy, completely unrestrained by tradition and free from the power and privilege of Anglicanism and the landed elite. But Chamberlain clashed with Gladstone over the question of Irish home rule. He and his supporters, known as Liberal Unionists for their support for the Act of Union between Britain and Ireland, ran as a separate party in the general election of 1886 and later defected to the Conservatives. A trip to North America in 1887 proved to be an epiphany for Chamberlain, opening his eyes to the ideal of a Greater Britain as a way of countering what he perceived to be the steady disintegration of the ties of empire. Upon his return, and for the rest of his life, Chamberlain reinvented himself as the most self-conscious and ardent imperial spokesman of his day, giving voice to the dream of a new imperial federation between the white colonies and Britain.

Chamberlain and his supporters went further, though, offering a bold, forward-looking policy for the more efficient use of the country's vast colonial possessions in order to revive the British economy, ailing under the effects of the late nineteenth-century depression and growing competition and protectionism from the United States and continental Europe. Under Lord Salisbury's Unionist coalition government,² from 1895 until 1903, Chamberlain gave shape to his imperial estates program, attempting to supplant the *laissez-faire* philosophy of nineteenth-century liberals with a new kind of state-directed, "constructive" imperialism. He called on the British government to provide the necessary financial and technical assistance for the extension of imperial communications, especially railways, and other infrastructural projects in order to facilitate the mobilization of the largely unexplored wealth of Britain's tropical colonies in Africa and the East.³ He lobbied hard to convince the permanent staff at the Colonial Office (CO) of the utility of scientific knowledge and technical expertise, especially in the fields of tropical medical and tropical agricultural research and training.⁴ He played a pivotal role in setting up

the West India Royal Commission, which included botanical advisers from Kew and which recommended grants and subsidies to aid the declining sugar industry and to encourage economic diversification of the islands.⁵

By employing the agrarian metaphor of a great estate in need of development, Chamberlain was very consciously articulating language associated with a landed, conservative ethos in order to appease Tories who feared his Radical roots and previous association with urban politics.⁶ This was, to some degree, a tactical move by Chamberlain to broaden his “business” view in a way that offered the Conservative-dominated Unionist Party a chance to refashion itself as the party of empire through a new and dynamic imperial policy. But his rhetoric also spoke to the continuing resonance of long-held assumptions and ideological tropes rooted in earlier moments of imperial crisis and expansion. There is a strong ideological bridge, as recent studies have shown, between the fin-de-siècle doctrines of empire-builders like Chamberlain and the earlier domestic and imperial policies of the age of William Pitt the Younger and Sir Joseph Banks.⁷ Late eighteenth-century advocates of agrarian improvement also envisioned an alliance of science and the state that would work toward the dissemination of progress both in Britain and the empire. However, this continuity at the ideological level should not distract us from the fact that Chamberlain’s proposal for an association of government and expertise to actively and intentionally develop the natural (and, later, human) resources of the colonies *did* indeed represent a watershed in the rationalization of the British Empire. It set the terms and parameters of political and philosophical debate for decades to come.

In recent years, historians have once again highlighted the importance of the cultural and ideological dimension of modern European colonialism.⁸ Imperial ideologies were not simply window dressing or rhetorical flourishes meant to obscure the real material motives behind expansion and conquest. Understanding the way in which ideological discourses were created, disseminated, institutionalized, and recast is central to understanding how officials viewed themselves as rulers and how they perceived the peoples and lands over which they ruled. Such discourses defined the limits of what could and could not be done. Nor were these sets of meanings monolithic and unchanging. Recent scholarship has highlighted the tensions and constraints that afflicted imperial efforts to impose power on other peoples.⁹ Although there was much continuity to imperial doctrine, the meaning of the language of imperialism evolved over time in response to changing circumstances both at home and abroad. It was also

laden with paradox and ambivalence, reflecting the contradictory and often enigmatic nature of policy-making and colonial administration on the ground.

This chapter builds on the new colonial historiography, examining the origins and reiterations of earlier assumptions and ideologies of “improvement” and “development” both in Britain and the empire, as well as the significance of Chamberlain’s crucial entrance into colonial affairs in the 1890s. I argue that Chamberlain’s years at the CO represent a critical moment in the British Empire, marking the effective beginning of the story of the triumph of the expert. In other words, the significance of the “New Imperialism” lies not so much in the novelty of its rhetoric as in the way it tied older arguments and metaphors to a new vision of the imperial state, and in the way it bound the development imperative to the rising agency of scientific knowledge, technical expertise, and state planning.

From Empty Lands to Tropical Abundance: Ideologies of Improvement and Development in Britain and the Empire before 1890

The term “development,” according to H. W. Arndt, first appeared in the lexicon of economic discourse around the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ Before then, political economists and moral philosophers had spoken instead of the progress of nations toward a state of “opulence” and “improvement.” It is indeed difficult to exaggerate the degree to which the language of improvement—that ultimate Georgian buzzword—reverberated in the minds, treatises, and speeches of British Enlightenment thinkers.¹¹ At the heart of the eighteenth-century idea of universal improvement was a belief that those who made the most efficient use of the material and human resources of the nation and its colonies had a right to control them. It implied a way of living and ecological use that exalted the benefits of fixed agriculture and husbandry, private property, and the production of commodities for the market.¹² We can trace the origins of the late eighteenth-century ideology of agrarian improvement back many centuries. It had long been associated with the reclamation of unused lands or wastes. This particular usage derived from the Anglo-Norman concept of waste land, which signified not only an uncultivated terrain such as the Fens but also land inhabited by few or no people.¹³

Prospective lands of colonization were also described as “empty” or “virgin,” rich in abundant resources but void of inhabitants, or else sparsely populated by nomadic peoples who were too primitive to effectively har-

ness the land's potential wealth. Arguments of this sort had been used to buttress European claims of the right of conquest and settlement since at least the earliest English settlements along the eastern seaboard of North America. Early settler claims rested initially on a mixture of religious and economic imperatives.¹⁴ The task of cultivating the soil was seen as part of the extension of the Lord's kingdom, a providential sign of England's chosen status as the true defender of Godly reformation. Early colonists drew a parallel between "taming the waste," by establishing new gardens and enclosures, and pacifying the "spiritual wilderness" of the heathen by bringing him into the world of Christian civilization.¹⁵ They also based their claims to the land on the Roman legal principle of *res nullius*, which defined all "empty things"—including unoccupied lands—as the common property of all, the fruits of which became the property of the first persons to make such terrain a "betterment" by mixing their labor with it. Perhaps the most well-known exposition of this kind comes from John Locke, who argued in his *Second Treatise of Government* that "whatsoever [a man] tilled and reaped, laid up and made use of, before it spoiled, that was his peculiar right; whatsoever he enclosed, and could feed, and make use of, the cattle and product was also his. But if either the grass of his inclosure rotted on the ground, or the fruit of his planting perished without gathering, and laying up, this part of the earth, notwithstanding his inclosure, was still to be looked on as waste, and might be the possession of any other." It's revealing that Locke chose to disparage, as the most fitting example of this lesson, the supposed misuse of nature by Native Americans, "who are rich in land, and poor in all the comforts of life; who nature having furnished as liberally as any other people, with the materials of plenty, i.e. a fruitful soil, apt to produce in abundance, what might serve for food, raiment, and delight; yet for *want of improving it by labour*, have not one hundredth part of the conveniencies we enjoy."¹⁶ The image of America as a resource-rich yet sparsely populated wilderness, inhabited by peoples who were unwilling to improve the land or were indeed incapable of doing so, served to ideologically render Native Americans as savages, nomadic hunters with no natural right to the lands they occupied. They roamed over these vast tracts rather than actually inhabiting them. Their subjugation and displacement by those who would plant, enclose, and improve the land was thus grounded on both biblical authority and natural law theory.

The wedding of agrarian improvement to the imperial mission reached its apogee during the long struggle against Revolutionary France, when

both the monarchy and the landed classes sought to reinvigorate the image of the Crown and the reach of government through an expansion of state ritual, power, and efficiency.¹⁷ Under the pressures of popular discontent at home and the threat of invasion from across the Channel, Pitt the Younger and his Tory associates embarked upon a program of centralization and consolidation of the British state. A whole series of innovations were introduced, including the creation of a new financial and taxation system, the beginnings of a permanent civil service, and the expansion of bureaucratic authority and expertise through the formation of numerous administrative boards. Through the Board of Agriculture, which was established in 1793, the government sought to stimulate production by providing grants for the extension of arable land, collecting statistics on production, population, and land tenures, and disseminating knowledge of new farming techniques.¹⁸ The enlargement of state power in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was even more impressive overseas, where a massive expansion of British imperial suzerainty not only opened the way for the creation of new colonies of settlement in the southern hemisphere but also ushered in new forms of imperial rule in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, South Asia, Southern Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific.¹⁹ Indeed, enclosure at home and colonial expansion abroad were deemed moral and necessary, and both received patronage from the Crown in the half-century following the American Revolution.

What made this “second” British Empire distinctive were the ideological currents of the Enlightenment. The doctrine of improvement gave its adherents faith and confidence in their possession of new modes of knowledge and new abilities to shape and manipulate nature to their will. Early nineteenth-century advocates of imperial expansion and settlement in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa often described these “new lands” as vacant grasslands, inhabited only by a thin scattering of backward and largely nomadic peoples whose low level of specialization and technology prevented them from effectively occupying the land and producing valuable agricultural commodities.²⁰ It was both the right and duty of Europeans to colonize and develop the resources of these previously unused or underutilized areas of the world. The spread of European ideas, goods, capital, and settlement was legitimated as the most sound and natural way to develop the material forces of these regions. Although local ecological factors such as low rainfall or the absence of domestic animals had historically kept population densities low in these regions, it is also true that smallpox, venereal disease, and other infections introduced

by Europeans—and often outrunning them—swept through the previously isolated indigenous populations, reducing their numbers by as much as a third or even a half.²¹

Thus, the arrival and spread of European colonists in these areas was facilitated, whether by design or chance, by a dramatic driving out of nomadic peoples and their way of life. The path lay open for those Europeans who settled these new lands to introduce new kinds of production and land use over vast areas. The same assumptions and rhetoric were heard in all Anglo settler countries in the nineteenth century.²² Settlers everywhere cleared the land of both wildlife and trees to make way for the expansion of commercial farming. The settler psyche was filled with ideals of rugged pioneers and sturdy yeoman farmers steadily supplanting the animals, forests, and peoples of these new lands and establishing in their place countries of small, owner-operated farms. The improving and populating of these “open spaces” and internal frontiers was evidence of the march of progress and civilization. In this, what may be called sciences of exploration and settlement—such as astronomy, geophysics, and natural history—came to play an important role, helping to identify potential opportunities as well as barriers to colonization through an extensive surveying and classifying of new lands, resources, and peoples.

Such progress was constrained, however, by an enduring legacy of the conquest epic. For while the relatively low population densities and demographic decline of indigenous peoples helped pave the way for successive waves of European migration in the nineteenth century, their destruction also generated a severe and chronic labor shortage. Settler societies sought to squeeze indigenous communities into providing labor on mines and European farms or else resorted to importation of servile or convict labor. The labor problem had an important impact on land use patterns in settler colonies, where animal husbandry became the material basis of life wherever grass was plentiful and people scarce. Many believed the great abundance of cheap land in the colonies acted as a disincentive to a sufficient supply of labor, since the low price of land enabled every new colonist to establish himself as a smallholder rather than working for others. In the 1830s and 1840s, colonial reformers like Edward Gibbon Wakefield elaborated a theory of systematic colonization as a way of solving the problem of chronic labor shortage in Australia. Wakefield argued that the imbalance between people and land could be remedied only through a government policy of restricting the amount of land available to settlers. By withholding title to waste lands or demanding a “sufficient

price” for land granted, the government could limit the quantity of land on the market and thereby compel laborers to work longer for wages before they could make the move to land proprietorship. The revenues that accrued to government from the sale of Crown land could be used in turn as an emigration fund to assist poor laborers to make the passage from Britain to the colonies.²³

In Australia, then, it appeared that the inherent march of progress was being stymied by critical barriers that could be overcome so as to make sustained settlement possible only through the aid of government initiatives to bring people and capital from overseas and to construct railways and irrigation works. It is no historical accident, according to Arndt, that development in the transitive sense—as something that had to be *made to happen*, as opposed to something that occurs naturally—was first employed in Australian (and, to a lesser extent, Canadian) economic writings of the 1830s and 1840s.²⁴ It is here, Arndt asserts, that the term was first conceived to describe deliberate efforts by states and private commercial companies to steadily occupy and exploit a country’s natural resources. But there was a flip side to the motif of “development before settlement,” for as Wakefield’s expositions make clear, the question of empty lands overseas was closely and consciously tied to the problem of surplus population in Europe itself. Indeed, as Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton insist, the origins of development as an intentional state practice may be equally, and for purposes of this study more usefully, located in the early nineteenth-century debate surrounding the Enlightenment belief in unlimited progress.²⁵ The origin of the debate is usually attributed to the writings of Thomas Malthus, who postulated that it was an “iron law of nature” for humanity to periodically succumb to misery and vice when population growth outstripped the finite necessities of life. Here, then, was a profoundly different understanding of the problem of population and its relationship to resources, one in which land was finite and people abundant.

In the tumultuous years of early industrial transformation in Britain—roughly from the end of the Napoleonic Wars until the 1840s—Malthus’s prediction that *surplus* population would lead to unemployment and immiserization of the poor in the newly forged urban slums of Britain seemed to be amply confirmed. It was here, amid the fear that agrarian revolt and growing industrial unrest might lead to social anarchy and possibly even revolution, that Victorian liberal thinkers like John Stuart Mill first conceived of development as a means by which the state could

impose order on unruly societal forces; that is, an idea of intentional development was formulated that attempted to reconcile progress with order. Central to this idea was the principle of trusteeship, whereby those with the knowledge of how to create order out of the social instability of rapid urbanization, poverty, and unemployment were to act as the stewards of humanity. It fell to the experts, to those who possessed scientific knowledge and understood the laws of social statics, and thus the ends that should guide public action, to point the way forward to the realization and improvement of progress by managing and making it rational. In other words, development—by way of the positive approach to knowledge—was first invented in the early nineteenth century as a way to ameliorate the chaos apparently brought on by progress itself.

As we will see, the post-Enlightenment meaning of development as state practice rather than immanent process would come to play a pivotal role in the emergence of scientific colonialism and the rise of the expert in the first half of the twentieth century. In the interim, however, the more dominant strand of eighteenth-century thought, which assumed improvement to be a naturally occurring trend, continued to buttress the liberal view of progress, in Britain and to a lesser extent in the empire. The strong influence of *laissez-faire* doctrine weighed against the realization of state-aided schemes for the amelioration of poverty in Britain; with the return of prosperity in the late 1840s, the debate subsided and such proposals were temporarily marginalized. Although the idea of intentional development of resources by the state in response to the problem of surplus population was first voiced in early industrial Europe, it would not be put forth again until the end of the nineteenth century by Joseph Chamberlain, and it would not be put into practice on any significant scale until the mid-twentieth century. But by then, as I argue in later chapters, the problem was not surplus population *in Britain*, but in the territories and dependencies of the colonial empire overseas.

The narrative of universal progress would find its champions as well as its detractors in other theaters of the British imperial world in the nineteenth century. Nowhere was this more the case than in India, where the new centralized state system constructed out of the English East India Company's military expansion between 1770 and 1820 gave birth to a new kind of administrative power, one in which the idea of improvement formed a critical part of the governing principles that sustained imperial rule over the subcontinent. In many ways, the legitimacy of the Company and later British Raj rested on the claim that, through the development

of systems of administration, law, statistics, ethnography, history, archaeology, and surveying, the state would control and utilize hitherto underproductive resources ostensibly to improve the lives and well-being of colonial peoples.²⁶ At the heart of the improvers' project in India was the creation of private property rights through rule of law. Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British rule in India revolved around the central question of land, beginning with the administration of Bengal, where the governor general, Lord Cornwallis, introduced a permanent land settlement in 1793.²⁷ For Cornwallis, as for all good English Whigs, the role of the state was to ensure the security of persons and property through the administration of justice and the upholding of the rule of law. He believed this could be realized by a permanent settlement that would limit the state's share of land revenue. His scheme sought to introduce private property in land by recognizing the proprietary rights of the zamindars, the great landholders, over the claims of the mass of peasant cultivators. A permanent settlement, Cornwallis believed, would offer the zamindars a strong incentive to improve the agricultural productivity of the land, which in turn would lead to extensive commerce and Company trade. It was a strategy premised on the Whig notion that a hereditary landed aristocracy held the best prospects for social stability and economic progress.

But not all Indian administrators were sympathetic to the principles inherent in the zamindari revenue settlement. In fact, most administrators outside of Bengal held a common contempt for the Cornwallis system.²⁸ Though they did not always agree on the alternative, men like Thomas Munro, Mountstuart Elphinstone, and Charles Metcalfe shared a romantic sensitivity to and paternal fondness for the conservation and protection of indigenous institutions. This instilled in them a strong admiration for the Indian village community, which they perceived to have evolved gradually and organically over hundreds of years. This remarkable cohesiveness and durability had allowed these "little republics," as Metcalfe described them, to remain virtually unchanged amid the disintegration and chaos that ensued upon the breakup of the Mughal Empire.²⁹ In place of the Cornwallis system, these administrators advocated a land-revenue policy based on the *ryotwari* or peasant system of land settlement, which they believed would revitalize the village economy and the old sense of communal ties.³⁰ They were joined in their efforts to uphold peasant cultivators' rights by the radical Utilitarian followers of James Mill and Jeremy Bentham. At first glance, Utilitarian critics like H. E.