

IMPERIALISM PAST AND PRESENT

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CHAPTER 1

Heart of Darkness Revisited

“Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place. They were men one could work with . . .”

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*¹

In 2010, a disturbing report made its unwelcome entry into an already tumultuous news cycle. Members of a U.S. Army brigade, assembled in a self-proclaimed “kill team,” had indiscriminately targeted civilians in southern Afghanistan. As trophies for their deeds, the soldiers collected fingers, leg bones, and skulls from their victims. Photos taken by the soldiers posing next to dead bodies came to light, along with the fact that the main instigator kept tally of each victim by having skulls tattooed on his calf. Three years later, a particularly gruesome video was made available on YouTube, to the dismay of its international audience. The footage, which has since been seen by over a million people, shows a man desecrating the corpse of a uniformed Syrian Army soldier. The perpetrator, also dressed in military

fatigues, completes his work by pulling out the soldier's heart. Then, shockingly, he sinks his teeth in it.²

Such news reports, though a recurring feature of contemporary life, trace a predictable arc in and out of public consciousness. The initial horror evoked by their gory details quickly subsides in the face of official reassurances and the unrelenting tide of news of the more soothing or stultifying kind. Insofar as they involve armed forces of democratic and civilized powers, or reliable, if publicly embarrassing, allies, officials and commentators are quick to dismiss these events as aberrations. Should the public seek to draw lasting political conclusions from such horrors, it will be predictably reminded that there is only one: the atavistic darkness lurking in the hearts of man since the emergence of the species. In covering the act of cannibalism in Syria, for example, the BBC was prepared to admit that "It is a reminder of the horror and bestiality of warfare," only to then ask, rhetorically, and as a way to put the matter to rest: "But does it tell us anything more than that?"³ And so it goes, from one aberration to another, from one lesson intended to teach nothing in the end to another, with remarkable continuity.

Even a cursory reflection on the available facts, however, shows that these atrocities were not aberrations committed in a political vacuum. Khalid al-Hamad, the cannibal in Syria, was not an amateur when it came to horrific acts. His response to his newfound international celebrity was an offer to share with the audience other videos, including one in which he cut another victim to pieces with a saw. Rather than just a deranged sadist, however, al-Hamad turned out to be a significant military and political figure. As the head of the Farouq Brigade, he directed the work of one of the largest and most powerful militias constituting the Free Syrian Army in its bloody civil war against the Assad government.

There is, moreover, nothing "civil" about the Syrian conflict, and not just for the obvious reasons illustrated in al-Hamad's video. The Farouq Brigade, regarded as one of the moderate Islamist

sections of the Free Syrian Army, receives the support of Turkey and the conservative sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf, while Assad's forces have the backing of the Lebanon-based Hezbollah and the Iranian government. In turn, lurking behind the regional powers involved in the conflict stand broader geopolitical forces as well. Western democracies have thrown their support behind the Syrian rebels, while Russia, which under the Assad government has access to its only naval base in the Mediterranean, opposes its ousting.

Similarly, the atrocities reported in Afghanistan are far less shocking once seen in their proper context. The war started in October 2001 with "Operation Enduring Freedom." Since then, freedom has proved elusive, as the occupation continues to prop up a government that is widely regarded as unspeakably corrupt, along with a number of lesser warlords and satraps. But the war has certainly been enduring, having gained the dubious distinction of becoming the longest war in American history. While it is difficult to estimate the amount of casualties involved, few doubt that Afghanistan has been the site of unrelenting and hardly surgical violence, carried out by various means. Drone strikes, questionably presented as a sanitized alternative to traditional warfare, have in any case found their complement in the unrestrained savagery of the bone-collecting kill team. In the context of such a brutal and prolonged conflict, the latter can in no sense be regarded as an isolated incident.

Significantly, the gruesome details of this story came to light as a result of an investigation that was triggered by the complaints not of Afghan civilians, but of a fellow American soldier who was subjected to threats and abuse. Brutalities of this sort, moreover, are standard fare in modern history. Calvin Gibbs, the main instigator of the kill team in Afghanistan, bragged about having done the same things during the occupation of Iraq. But collecting the remains of the enemy was also widely practiced by American soldiers during the Vietnam War. And when Gibbs referred to the victims of his grisly deeds as "dirty savages," he

was, consciously or not, tapping into a well-entrenched history of conquest and occupation.⁴

A more sensible accounting of the atrocities in Afghanistan and Syria, then, cannot take place without addressing their troubling continuities with a longer history. The recent events in Syria have a series of important precedents, from the early twentieth-century British protectorates in the Middle East, to the more recent overthrow and brutal killing of Muammar Qaddafi by some of the same elements now active against Assad, aided and abetted by the same foreign powers. While the ongoing quagmire in Afghanistan has its own distinctive and brutal history, it should not be difficult to recognize it as a new chapter of the classic “great game” pitting rival powers against each other in the region since the nineteenth century.

In the prevailing ideological climate, however, a sober and lasting recognition of the continuities between the past and the present is a difficult achievement. The BBC does what it can to promote historical amnesia, since that is the most convenient form of political amnesty as well, while cruder media outfits readily blame distant and unaccountable savages for atrocities old and new. Through these efforts, the fact that governments of ostensibly civilized Western nations have played and continue to play a commanding role in such events is conveniently forgotten. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, cited at the beginning of this introduction and too often dismissed as merely the expression of European racism, is a powerful reminder of how the encounter between civilization and barbarism revealed as much about the former as it did about the latter. In twenty-first-century Syria and southern Afghanistan, as in Conrad’s depiction of the colonial Congo, from the standpoint of certain “civilized” interests cannibals are regarded not only as ferocious, but useful as well.

The horrors of the past, then, live in the horrors of present, and a responsible engagement with the latter requires an understanding of the former. But if a sense of historical continuity is indispensable in dealing with contemporary problems,

down to their most grotesque manifestations, it would also be incorrect to paint such continuities with too broad a brush. To be sure, war and violence have been with us for a long time. But the political and economic parameters through which they are systematically produced and reproduced today are part of a definite historical epoch of which the present is regrettably still part.

Conrad's book is useful on this score as well. Although the novel is often interpreted (or reinterpreted, as in the case of the film *Apocalypse Now*) as an exposure of the futile pretense on the part of civilization to purge the atavistic evils of the species, it is difficult to think of a work that expresses more directly and precisely the characteristics of the historical period in which it was produced. *Heart of Darkness* was originally published in 1899, at the apex of the colonial conquest of the world, and in particular at the heyday of the British empire. Its author, a naturalized British subject with fifteen years of experience in the empire's merchant fleet, was intimately familiar with this new global reality. *Heart of Darkness*, then, arguably tells us less about the nature of the human species than it does about the nature of a specific historical epoch: that of imperialism.

No doubt much has changed since 1899, and many of these changes could have been reasonably expected to reduce the barbarous character of international politics. The colonial empires have come to an end, all the regions of the world have been thoroughly integrated into a global economy, and a veritable cornucopia of institutions and organizations is now dedicated to upholding a dazzling array of human rights. Yet, while some things have changed, certain fundamental parameters remain in place, and the unpleasant past described by Conrad continues to haunt the present. The instance of cannibalism in Syria or the barbaric collection of human bones in Afghanistan, then, should not be seen as the inevitable expression of an atavistic "heart of darkness," or as aberrations to be temporarily lamented, then forgotten. They are, rather, particularly appalling manifestations

of the more historically specific, more historically entrenched rot that is the subject of this book.

The Problem with Imperialism

In the pages that follow we will examine the origins, development, and contemporary manifestations of imperialism. In doing so we will also attempt to demonstrate that a serious engagement with imperialism as an enduring historical reality is a necessary and urgent task. But imperialism is not the kind of subject that can be mentioned, let alone examined at length, innocently. To invoke this term is also to invoke a complex and largely undigested history, a series of instinctive political judgments, along with a host of theoretical confusions.

After a long hiatus, when it was seemingly banished to the wilderness of esoteric academic debate, imperialism is back as one of the buzzwords of the day. In the past decade in particular, scholars, policymakers, and political pundits have been using the term with increasing frequency in their commentary on international relations. Many have invoked it as an old specter only to nervously deny its contemporary applicability. A smaller but highly significant minority has embraced it as a positive good—the only way out of the morass of contemporary politics. Not surprisingly, the sudden popularity of the term has created great confusion about what it means and why we should care about it. Regardless of whether it is used as an invective or an ideal, imperialism has turned into an all-encompassing buzzword that, as it has been remarked, many use, though few can say what it really means.

Part of the difficulty is that the term “imperialism” is employed to refer to the most diverse range of economic, political, cultural, and linguistic phenomena, with the widest range of historical applicability. From the Persian empire of antiquity to contemporary American military operations in the Middle East, from China’s ongoing economic penetration of Africa to the old

Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, passing through any real or perceived form of “hierarchy” and “privilege,” everything is seemingly pertinent to the subject. But this use of imperialism as shorthand for any form of imposition through history actually deprives it of its analytical and political purchase. Used in this loose sense, “imperialism” can easily be brushed off as an unavoidable, if regrettable, secretion of human nature, of man’s will to power. To understand why imperialism is best employed in reference to a distinct historical period and its problems, it is useful to briefly examine the emergence and evolution of the term itself.

Let us start with “empire,” a word that is most commonly used interchangeably with imperialism. This term derives from the Latin “imperium” and was used by the ancient Romans to denote the ability to command or to rule at home—specifically to make laws and to wage wars. The use of the term expanded alongside the expansion of Rome itself, referring to the rule of conquered territories well beyond the original homeland of the rulers. The language of empire was then picked up by the early modern European kingdoms in the process of their own expansion, and made its way into common usage.

While “empire” has long historical roots, the term “imperialism” is a relatively recent innovation. “Imperialism” made its entrance onto the world stage well into the second half of the nineteenth century. In this case also what began as a matter of domestic policy became projected onto the international arena on the heels of momentous developments. Initially used to describe the policies of the French emperor Napoleon III in the 1860s, imperialism gradually came to be associated with the new surge of colonial acquisitions by European states. By the 1890s, both supporters and opponents of colonial expansion routinely employed the term “imperialism” in their debates over the direction of their societies and, indeed, the world. The term referred to the frenzied struggle that had broken out for a share of the rapidly shrinking pool of territories available for colonial

control. The division of what was left of the world but also the increasingly insistent demands for a more “equitable” redivision in accordance with a changing relation of forces at this stage took place largely, though not entirely, in the field of diplomacy. This struggle involved the British hegemon and its historic rival, France, but also industrialized upstarts (the Germans, Japanese, and Americans), fading old players (the Spanish and Portuguese), and, somewhat incongruously, even the Belgians and the Italians.

However, as the most astute observers of the day insisted, in spite of certain superficial similarities these were not like the vulgar empires of the past, at least in an economic sense. What had already been an implicit, if often undetected, connection between the domestic and international order came to be the subject of conscious scrutiny. For the first time, intellectuals of different political persuasions began to put into focus how the staggering economic developments in the advanced countries made the drive to acquire reliable sources of raw materials and secure markets a necessity. The economic logic behind the new era of imperialism, however, was not merely a desiccated matter of efficiency.

During this heyday, men like Cecil Rhodes proudly wore the mantle of “imperialists,” not just on account of the immense wealth that was being accumulated in the enterprise, but also because imperialism promised a solution to the problem of maintaining social order at home. As Rhodes argued, the only way to deal with a burgeoning working class in England was to ensure high rates of profits that would trickle down to them, as well as to acquire new territories where they could migrate. Moreover, the benefits of imperialism would extend not just to the great unwashed at home, but more broadly still, as it would bring civilization into the farthest and darkest corners of the world.

However, this happy picture of what imperialism meant was never quite as stable as its supporters presented it. While early liberal opponents like the scholar J. A. Hobson began to expose

the problems with the imperialist enterprise, it was the rise of the international socialist movement that set the stage for a decisive turn in the way imperialism was understood and used in the broader political discourse. As the great powers of the day hurtled into what would come to be known as the First World War, the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin wrote a short, explosive pamphlet that laid out the origins, the trajectory, and the essentially undemocratic, exploitative nature of imperialism. Here the link between the domestic and the international, the economic and the political already diagnosed by Hobson, was revealed in an even more forceful manner.

The propulsive economic development associated with capitalism was giving rise not just to the well-documented inequities in the advanced countries, but also, and systematically, to conquest, subjugation, and war on an international scale. The ongoing predatory integration of all corners of the world was then not an atavistic evil, but a distinctly modern phenomenon bound up with the other remarkable transformations of the age. Moreover, it was not at bottom a misguided set of policies with lamentable human consequences, but a full-fledged economic and political system on a global scale that had to be confronted as such.

There were at least two good reasons why Lenin's argument proved to be persuasive. One, in spite of the efforts to present the enterprise as civilizing and mutually beneficial, the reality of life for the vast majority of the colonized populations remained a scathing and irrefutable indictment of imperialism. Two, despite their rhetorical commitment to the "right to self-determination," the victors of the "war to end all wars" not only divided up the remains of the Ottoman empire among themselves, but also justified their continued right to colonial rule through the mandate system of the new League of Nations. In other words, they maintained the old imperialist reality through new forms, setting the stage for future conflicts.

In this context, the fact that the Bolsheviks not only renounced the territorial acquisitions of Tsarist Russia but also

publicly disavowed the Tsar's secret treaties with the other powers only strengthened their anti-imperialist credentials. Even in the throes of a struggle for its own survival, the new Soviet government sought to rally anti-imperialist elements from both colonial as well as colonized countries. In 1920, the Soviet government organized the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku. The meeting, attended by over 1,800 delegates from Asia and Europe, linked the fate of the Soviet Union to the defeat of imperialism. Later on, even as the political climate in the Soviet Union had changed considerably, leaders from Asia and Africa sought and received the support of the Communist International to create the "League Against Imperialism" in 1927. The first meeting of the League in Brussels brought together 200 delegates from 37 states and colonized regions, representing 134 organizations. Given the fact that they were actively involved in nationalist struggles in their countries, most of them faced imprisonment by the colonial authorities immediately after returning from the conference. The League never met again, and considering the political trajectory of many of the individuals involved, hardly provided a lasting solution to the problem it sought to address. But it was another sign that the veil of euphemisms and lies that once shrouded the term "imperialism" was coming apart at the seams.

Over the course of the next two decades, as nationalist movements around the world became more and more prominent, and as the great powers hurtled toward another catastrophic global conflict, the claim that imperialism was in any way beneficial to the colonized became impossible to sustain. The decolonization of the Third World, beginning after World War II, seemed to confirm this prognosis. Yet this process, which in some instances took the form of an orderly transfer of power between governments, posed new questions from the standpoint of the continuing relevance of imperialism. On the one hand, the fall of the empires and the formal political independence of the former colonies appeared to be a significant achievement. On the other

hand, exploitation, subjugation, and inequality, to say nothing of conflict and war, could hardly be said to have come to an end in the international arena. In this context, the use of the term “imperialism,” which had found an obvious and direct application in the policies that had characterized the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, began to subside and give way to a different kind of vocabulary.

The criticism of lingering forms of hierarchy and inequality began to be expressed more in the cultural vein, particularly under the influence of new moods and theories. The employment and criticism of “imperialism,” for example, gave way to terms such as “orientalism,” which framed the question of the historical encounter between the West and the rest of the world in terms best understood through the prism of cultural studies, rather than politics and economics. “Imperialism” had after all come to be associated with Marxist politics and, by extension, with the Soviet Union, particularly in the Western academy. By the 1970s, though political restlessness and discomfort with capitalism at home and abroad had far from disappeared, a wide layer of “leftist” and formerly “leftist” intellectuals no longer took seriously the notion that a new kind of society was being built behind the Iron Curtain. Many were keen to point out that if the term “imperialism” remained useful, it should be applied first and foremost to the relation between the Soviet Union and its satellites. “Imperialism,” as a concept and as a shorthand for a certain way to understand the world, was a casualty of this intellectual and political process.

The decline in the usage of the term became precipitous in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War and the declaration of a “new world order” set the stage for claims about the possibilities, if not yet the actuality, of an epoch that would no longer be governed by the ever-present competition and conflict among great powers. In lieu of the old paradigms, humanitarianism would finally be allowed to bloom. The developments of the 1990s—the First Gulf War, the

establishment of the international tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the interventions in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, the signing of the Rome Statute leading to the institution of the International Criminal Court—were hailed by policymakers and mainstream commentators alike as steps fulfilling the great expectations of this era. By the turn of the century, it appeared as though imperialism (both the term and the phenomenon) was truly a historical relic, invoked only by diehards who refused to see that a new world had emerged from the ashes of the old.

Within only a couple of years, however, the situation began to change dramatically. Imperialism was suddenly back in fashion, and in a way that it had not been for well over half a century. In what appeared to be a carefully timed blitzkrieg of publications, a group of scholars and policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic began making the claim that imperialism had been given a bad rap by leftists, left-leaning nationalists, and ivory tower academics who were unwilling to recognize the hard realities of the past century. Ensclosed in well-funded think tanks, high-level government positions, and Ivy League academic institutions, the individuals making up this group—including Niall Ferguson, Robert Cooper, Stanley Kurtz, Max Boot, Deepak Lal, and Sebastian Mallaby—were quite different in terms of the levels of sophistication they brought to their argument, political influence, and telegenic personality. What united them was the claim that the imperialism practiced by liberal states (Britain in the past, and the United States in the present) was not just beneficial but actually necessary to maintain peace and stability in the world. This, they argued, was particularly true given the large number of failed and failing states that constituted the formerly colonized regions of the world. Not coincidentally, this area included Afghanistan and Iraq, the two countries invaded by the United States in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The prominence of the neo-imperialists has waned in the decade since the inaugural salvos of operations “Enduring Freedom”

and “Iraqi Freedom.” Their fate to some extent is a measure of the popular response to the character, duration, and costs of the wars. But their arguments about the relevance of imperialism continue to resonate, though perhaps not in the way they intended. It is indeed true that much has changed since the heady days when President George W. Bush spoke under the “Mission Accomplished” banner on the USS *Lincoln* in 2003. Mainstream policymakers and political pundits no longer like to be openly associated with the rhetoric of imperialism. Once invoked, however, the specter of imperialism is not so easy to banish, and it now haunts the discussions surrounding the fallout from NATO’s war in Libya, the machinations in the Ukraine, and the demands for another intervention in Syria.

Was NATO’s intervention in Libya in 2011 a manifestation of imperialism, even though it was actually sanctioned by the resolutions of the UN Security Council? How are the brutalities and conflicts taking place in countries such as Afghanistan and Syria related to the history of imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Does the seemingly universal concern for “humanitarianism” and human rights rule out the applicability of imperialism to contemporary politics? To answer these questions, it is of course necessary to understand what exactly imperialism is, and that is a task we will turn to in the next chapter. The point of the discussion in this section is a simple one. The history of the term “imperialism”—its emergence, its usage—follows the history of the actual phenomenon itself. Put differently, while empires and violent struggles over territory and resources might have existed since the earliest stages of human civilization, imperialism has a more specific application—it emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century and persists to this day through various ebbs and flows. How we can understand this phenomenon, what led to it, and the ways in which it has evolved are issues that will form the subject of the remaining chapters of this book.

In the next chapter we will take on the question of how to best understand imperialism as a theoretical concept, engaging with a series of influential arguments that have been made in different periods in regards to it. We will then begin our examination of the long, actual (rather than conceptual) history of imperialism. Chapter 3 focuses on the period from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century—the classical age of imperialism manifested in the form of the colonial empires. Chapter 4 explains the enduring relevance of imperialism in the aftermath of decolonization by focusing on the politics of the Cold War era. Chapter 5 reviews the tumultuous period after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, down to the present. We conclude by reaffirming the central claim of the book that understanding the nature and trajectory of imperialism is crucial not just as an intellectual endeavor but in finding a solution to the tragic impasse that characterizes global politics today.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*, New York: Dover, 1990, p. 31.
2. Salma Abdelaziz and Holly Yan, “Syrian rebel cuts out soldier’s heart, eats it,” CNNWorld, May 14, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/05/14/world/meast/syria-eaten-heart/>.
3. Jonathan Marcus, “Gruesome Syria video pinpoints West’s dilemma,” May 14, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22521161>.
4. Patrick Oppman, “Soldier found guilty of murdering Afghans, sentenced to life,” CNN, November 11, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/11/10/justice/soldier-murder-rial/>

Chapter 2

1. H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, p.8.
2. W. T. Stead (ed.), *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes*, London: William Clowes Ltd., 1902; also available at https://archive.org/stream/lastwilltestamen00rhodiala/lastwilltestamen00rhodiala_djvu.txt
3. All the quotations attributed to Schumpeter are from his 1918 essay “The Sociology of Imperialism.” For excerpts, see <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1918schumpeter1.asp>; see also Joseph Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes* (translated by Heinz Norden, edited with an introduction by Paul Sweezy), New York: Augustus M. Kelley, Inc., 1951.