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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

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Title: Imperialist Ideology, Romantic Anti-Capitalism and J A Hobson.

by: Preben Kaarsholm

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IMPERIALIST IDEOLOGY, ROMANTIC ANTI-CAPITALISM AND J.A. HOBSON

Preben Kaarsholm

IMPERIALIST IDEOLOGY

Imperialist ideology remains an elusive concept. Most often it is taken to indicate a body of texts that justify and legitimize imperialism and are employed more or less consciously by imperialists to rationalize and propagandize their political behaviour and economic goals.[1] Or, imperialist ideology is conceived as an organically related group of ideas or themes, a body of thought, so to speak, which make up the substance and contents of such texts and can be pointed out by means of critical analysis to be also existing as the hidden meaning of a more varied canon of literature, if not of the literature of a whole period or "epoch".[2] Both definitions run the risk of reductionism and of bringing together under one heading texts and concepts that are heterogeneous and contradictory. An alternative way of defining imperialist ideology would be to see it as the expression of a certain historically determined mentality or psychology, in which case the decoding of imperialist ideology must consist in the systematic construction of the essence or structure of such a mentality or collective (un)conscious.[3] More reasonably, perhaps, imperialist ideology may be regarded as a "mental structure" or "way of thinking" by means of and through which several different and often contradictory types of contents can be communicated and brought to function.

In the last decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century imperialist ideology at least in England seems to consist mainly of such a "mental structure" or "way of thinking" that can be found to exist not only in the utterances of explicit advocates of imperialism, but also in those of anti-imperialists and of people who are apparently not concerning themselves with imperialists at all. A characteristic feature of this "mental structure" is that it bases itself upon and forms a variation of a much more widespread pattern of thought and feeling, i.e. that of structuring the mind around the contradictory themes of

"civilization" and "nature".

This dualism is an active principle in bourgeois thinking from Rousseau to Freud, but undergoes significant variations in the course of history. Thus early bourgeois revolutionary ideology uses the basic identity of "nature" and "reason" to criticize a false and oppressive feudal social order and envisages a future where "civilization" and "nature" are in harmony.[4]

In imperialist ideology the two poles confront each other in a particularly antagonistic manner: Only through strong efforts of repression is it possible for "civilization" to maintain its superiority in relation to "nature", and the battle is never finally won. "Nature" continually presents a danger of "civilization" decaying and relapsing into its opposite. Thus the attitudes towards "civilization" within imperialist ideology can vary a lot and may be more or less optimistic or pessimistic as well as totally negative.[5] In the period around the turn of the century this extremely dualistic way of conceptualizing manifests itself in England within a wide range of intellectual and practical fields. It find its way into both bourgeois and plebeian forms of culture and into the discourse of both capitalists and socialists, and it can be found to structure thought and action in the economy, in discussions of foreign and domestic politics, in education, in view of the family and of sex and sexual identities, in upbringing and socialization.

In the definition imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism. But the view of capitalism in imperialist ideology is ambivalent. Imperialist ideology may express a straightforward apologetics of imperialist initiatives and extol the progress of capitalist civilization. But it often takes the form of romantic anti-capitalism and has at its root a deepfelt unease about the quality of life in the developing urban centres of the Western world. For spokesmen of the existing order and for romantic anti-capitalist alike imperialist thinking formulates an alternative to a social system in crisis.[6]

These ambiguities come to a head in the intensive ideological life of the Boer War years where a polyphonous chorus of voices take up the basic themes of imperialist ideology. On the conservative side, war and imperialism are seen as stepping stones to a more efficient and authoritarian society, on the more critical side they produce confusion. Liberal war critics will praise the Boer community as an alternative to a decadent civilization dominated by Jewish finance capital. Socialists will either defend war and imperialism as necessary stages in the development of civilization, support them for nationalistic reasons, or criticize them as the catastrophic consequences of capitalist accumulation and class rule. Cultural critics will identify the heart of darkness with the heart of civilization, the savagery abroad with the abyss at home. The impenetrable jungle that is a favourite landscape in imperialist fiction begins to symbolize the weirdness and alienation of modern urban life and the mysteries of minds

dominated by conflicts between reason and impulse, consciousness and the unconscious, civilization and nature.[7] The power and penetration of the imperialist way of thinking lie in its extreme adaptability and flexibility. Further, a study of popular culture in the Boer War period suggests the existence of a certain potential of experience that will have promoted and eased its acceptance. The popularity of imperialist topics and tableaux in contemporary variety shows, in popular fiction and pictures, in children's literature, and in the press points to a great appetite for an imperialist frame of reference in large parts of the population as well as to a great readiness in theatre managers, editors etc. to exploit this appetite. However, popular culture also offers ambiguities in its formulation of imperialist ideology. As not all music hall shows were jingoistic in their dealings with empire, some "low" cultural forms were rather subversive and critical about the repressive rule of bourgeois civilization over human nature.[8]

All the ambiguities and contradictions of imperialist ideology only make sense when they are brought together and interpreted as "voices" talking to each other within the cultural and social totality of a given period. Only within such a context will it be possible also to determine the "weight" and penetration of each individual "voice" and utterance.[9]

ROMANTIC ANTI-CAPITALISM

The romantic anti-capitalism that was referred to above as a component in imperialist ideology has been shown to play an especially prominent part in the *German* history of ideas because of the peculiar conjunction in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries of high-powered capitalist development and a semi-feudal form of state. This is the essence of the "deutsche Misère" spoken of by critics who have tried to point out the roots of fascism in the "imperialist thinking" of an earlier period.[10] However, in the German context romantic anti-capitalism also provides the conceptual framework for a *critique of* imperialism. This is particularly so at the time of the South African War where the pro-Boer movement in Germany (and in other continental countries) makes widespread use of romantic anti-capitalist arguments. Before going into a discussion of imperialist ideology and romantic anti-capitalism in England, it might be useful to look a bit more closely at the German situation.

An example of German pro-Boerism is the author Ludwig Thoma - who is perhaps best known as a board member of the satirist weekly *Simplicissimus*. In 1900 Thoma was the editor of a *handsomelt* produced work of progaganda called *Der Burenkrieg* , a mixture of short articles, biographies of Boer leaders, poems and prints. (One of the prints - a beautifully coloured one by Th. Th. Heine - became well-known in England; it is called "Heldenverehrung" and is subtitled "Englische Prinzessinnen überreichen dem jüngsten

Soldaten der britischen Armee das Viktoriakreuz, weil er, obgleich erst dreizehn Jahre alt, bereits acht Burenfrauen vergewaltigt hat."[11] The leitmotif of the volume is the contrast between the authentic Boer community which possesses genuine culture and the decadence of British capitalist civilization. The Boers are shown as old-fashioned farmers with strong characters, good physique and high morals, the British as urban degenerates without either physical or moral stamina.

Similar themes pervade the poetry written by Ludwig Thoma in the period. In "Englands-Frauen" from 1900 the British are shown as characterized by a peculiarly decadent mixture of brutality and hypersensitivity:

> Noch jede Katze ward bei ihnen fett
> Und durfte ungestört das Haus verdrecken.
> Auch gegen Hündchen sind sie wirklich nett,
> Erlauben ihnen gern, sie abzuschlecken.
>
> Doch keine rührt sich, wenn der edle Lord,
> Weil er an Männer sich nicht mag getrauen,
> Die Farmen niederbrennt und feigen Mord
> Wehrlosen Knaben droht und schwachen Frauen.[12]

Thoma's way of reasoning is influenced by that of the so-called "völkische" movement, a conservative populist group that tried to mobilize resistance against capitalism's destruction of traditional values. This ideological programme which was strongly nationalist and often anti-semetic had its political base among the farmers of outlying areas like Bavaria and Schleswig and was also influential among intellectuals - particularly in the Munich milieu.[13]

It is interesting, however, that ideas very similar to those of the "völkische" were influential in circles that were generally much more progressive, or where at least, to quote Adorno, reaction and progress cannot be separated like the sheep from the goats.[14] For example, one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, Ferdinand Tönnies, in his work on "Community and Association" - *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1887 - explores the same unease about modern capitalist, urban developments that is at the root of the populist agitation. The ideas of Tönnies about the antagonism between original "cultures" and modern "civilization" become the point of departure for the critique of capitalism in the work of Simmul, Max Weber and the young Georg Lukács. Parallel to this development the romantic anti-capitalism of Nietzsche with its critique of democracy and modern decadent moralism, in the writings of Thomas Mann is transformed into a brilliant exposition of social history which laments the decay of traditional bourgeois values brought about by modern finance capitalism.[15]

J.A. HOBSON

The point of all this is to demonstrate the peculiarly "amphibious" nature of romantic anti-capitalism which for special reasons that have to do with the form of capitalist development and the nature of the state is particularly clear-cut in the German context: Only after the political events of 1917-18 does it become unavoidably necessary for German intellectuals to choose sides between socialism and capitalist reaction. Romantic anti-capitalism is no longer a possibility.[16]

The point is also, however, to try to show that romantic anti-capitalism is an issue in England in the Boer War period and that it is the "amphibious" character of this ideological current that accounts for some of the contradictions within Imperialist thought *and* for the similarities in the way of thinking of pro- and anti-imperialists. This can perhaps best be seen if we take a closer look at a prominent anti-imperialist like *J.A. Hobson.*

Hobson is an important mediating figure between romantic anti-capitalism and modern socialism. On the one hand he provides a link between Marxist and socialist analysis of social development and the early English anti-capitalism of Carlyle and Ruskin. On the other hand he also mediates between English and German history of ideas in so far as he lets himself be inspired directly by German romantic anti-capitalism, as can be seen from his drawing upon Nietzsche's critique of bourgeois democracy (in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 1886) to support his own view in *Confessions of an Economic Heretic* , his autobiography of 1938.[17]

Hobson was, as he himself says, "Born and bred in the middle stratum of the middle class of a middle-sized industrial town of the Midlands", and this made him "favourably situated for a complacent acceptance of the existing social order".[18] A similar disposition he attributes to Ruskin[19], and like Ruskin he quite early in his professional life became a "heretic", who was excluded from the prospects of an academic career and had to fight his way alone[20]. Thus in a sense both Ruskin and Hobson were solid bourgeois who were cut loose from their moorings, and this may account for some of the contradictions of their thought.

The "amphibious" element in Hobson can be demonstrated by looking at three examples: (1) his view of democracy, (2) his attitude towards marriage and birth control, and (3) his way of contrasting the Boer community with "Jewish finance capital" in his book on *The War in South Africa.*[21]

As regards democracy, Hobson distances himself from Ruskin's "mediaevalism" and "new feudalism". On the other hand, in his book on *Imperialism* he distinguishes between the existing bourgeois "sham" democracy and what he calls "genuine democracy". The latter concept he describes more specifically in his autobiography, in the chapter called "The Revision of Democracy", as Economic" in contradistinction to "political" democracy:

> The crude principle of a distinctively political democracy in which all men, irrespective of their wide differences in ability, character, and experience are supposed to count equally through the franchise and the representative system, cannot figure as the right principle for economic democracy.[22]

If Ruskin's "caste system", where the children of unskilled workers must naturally continue the "slave work" of their parents cannot be unconditionally accepted, Hobson still thinks that a "genuine democracy" has to be based on some sort of "organic" hierarchy where experts for the sake of "social utility" or "efficiency" have a special authority within their individual fields.

As to marriage and birth control, Hobson seems to be in full agreement with Ruskin that "The first provision for a sound society is that its citizens shall be well born", and

> That society should tacitly sanction the transmission and increase of every form of hereditary disease, vice or folly, ignoring its first duty, that of maintaining the standard of health, intelligence, and morals in the community, is quite the most foolish and most wasteful abdication of responsibility in which any government can possibly indulge.

In the *Confessions* Hobson becomes even more straightforward. The world is facing a serious "qualitative" population problem: In the international context, the birth rate of the "higher" civilizations is decreasing which means that the earth is facing the prospect of being "peopled" by "definitely lower races". Correspondingly, on the national level "the reproduction rate of the upper grades is less than that of the lower grades of the population." On this point, Hobson's "ethical" views are hardly distinguishable from those of Benjamin Kidd and Karl Pearson that he criticizes in the chapter on "The Scientific Defence of Imperialism" in his book on *Imperialism*, of 1902. His instances of families of "genius and ability" - the Darwins, Huxleys, Coleridges - correspond closely to Galton's in *Hereditary Genuis*.

Nowhere does Hobson's romantic anti-capitalism emerge as clearly as in his contrasting the Boer community with urban finance capitalism in his book on *The War in South Africa* of 1900. As always, Hobson is full of reservations that are meant to confuse his critics. His account of the Boer republics is balanced, and he warns against "the ignominious passion of Judenhetze". Nevertheless, his romantic views as regards the contrast between rural health and urban decadence and his anti-semitism are unmistakable. In a letter to C.P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, of 2 September 1899 Hobson says of the Jews of Johannesburg: "Many of them are the veriest scum of Europe".[24]

Hobson's basic point in the book - that the British (or the Dutch for that matter) have no place in South Africa because in the long run the country belongs to the black people (his chapter on "The Natives in South Africa" is extremely intelligent and prophetic) is a sound one and quite exceptional for the period.[25] With regard to the war, however, Hobson is trying to establish that it is the manoeuvre of a capitalist fraction dominated by Rhodes and a Jewish (and not British!) conspiracy meant to bring about a political system that may guarantee cheap black labour power for the mines.

Even though Hobson does not sing the unqualified praise of the Boers, he sees the war as a struggle between 'culture' and 'civilization', between the "organic" hierarchical farming community of the Boers and the metropolitan, decadent civilization of the "foreign Jews" which is epitomized in the city of Johannesburg, "essentially a Jewish town".[26] The contrast between health and decadence comes out clearly in Hobson's description of the Boer farmers that come to the market of "Jewburg" in the early morning:

> These are the sons of the country; their fathers conquered and brought the land under rude cultivation and control; yet almost their only real connection with this treasure-centre of their country is these brief early morning visits to the market, where they sell their farm produce to the horde of foreigners who are living in luxury upon the natural wealth they extract (through Kaffir labour) from the strip of land on which they settle.[27]

Apart from the reservation "through Kaffir labour" this might be taken almost directly from Ruskin - or from the German Boer idylls.

Another parallel to Hobson's idealization of the Boer community can be found in the writings of Olive Schreiner before and during the South African War. Like Hobson Schreiner provides a fascinating example of "amphibious" thinking, a historically unique mixture of imperialist ideology (e.g. in the form of evolutionism, racism and eugenicism) and critique of "commercial imperialism" as it manifests itself in the war. It must be said, however, that Schreiner's infatuation for the traditional Boer community (which by the way was a rather one-sided affair) comes to an end after the war when it turns out that old-fashioned Afrikaner culture and modern British capitalist civilization are not mutually exclusive after all - a historical compromise vaguely reminiscent of the "deutsche Misère"[28].

Behind Hobson's attack on the finance capitalists lies his belief that this group constitutes only a small, if very powerful fraction in society which is not only responsible for Imperialism, but also represents a threat to free competition and to peace and understanding between the social classes.

Hobson argues in favour of social reform and high wages as an alternative way of establishing an "equilibrium" and overcoming the crisis of capitalism. Basing himself on traditional romantic anti-capitalist distinctions he contrasts a "sound" free-trade capitalism with a less healthy "finance" or "monopoly" variety - a pattern of thought that is later taken over by Lenin and given a different perspective.

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NOTES

1. Thus ideology is often conceived much too schematically as part of a "superstructure" supplementing a material "base". However, also theories that stress the relative autonomy of the ideological "level" sometimes make use of a too limited and "functional" understanding of imperialist ideology. Cf. e.g. the role attributed to imperialist ideology in Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn's outline of English history in their *New Left Review* articles of the mid-sixties and E.P. Thompson's critique of this position in his essay "The Peculiarities of the English" (1965), reprinted in *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*, (London 1978).

2. This is for example the understanding of Georg Lukács in *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (1954), repr. Darmstadt und Neuwied 1973.

3. Inspiration for such an approach could be drawn from e.g. the methodological deliberations of *Lucien Goldman* in *Le dieu caché* (Paris 1959) and *Pour une sociologie du roman* (Paris 1964).

4. Cf. Urs Bitterli: *Die 'Wilden' und die 'Zivilisierten'*, München 1976 and V.G. Kiernan: *The Lords of Human Kind*, (London 1969). For early bourgeois ideas of a utopian harmony between 'civilization' and 'nature', cf. Agnes Heller: *Die Theorie de Gefühle*,(Hamburg 1980), 243ff.

5. Examples of optimism and pessimism can be found in Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883) and Kidd's *The Control of the Tropics* (1898) respectively. As the South African War approaches, pessimism seems to be getting the upper hand, cf. the widespread comparisons between the state of the British and the last days of the Roman Empire in contemporary journals. The basic disagreement is whether the decline and fall comes from within or from without.

6. Imperialism is seen as an alternative to the crisis of capitalism in Arnold White's *Efficiency and Empire* (London 1901). Similar ideas are prominent in the writings of Lord Milner, cf. H.C. Schröder: *Imperialismus und antidemokratisches Denken. Alfred Milners Kritik am politischen System Englands*, Wiesbaden 1978 and G.R. Searle: *The Quest for National Efficiency*, (Berkeley 1971). As to romantic anti-capitalism, see below.

7. Cf. the presentation of the Congo and of London in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *The Secret Agent* (1907). Similarly the parallels between

the jungle and the city are emphasized in C.F.G. Masterman's *From the Abyss* (1902) amd Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903). Cf. London's presentation of the degenerates of London's East End as "gorillas" and "cavemen": "They are a new species, a breed of city savages .. The slum is their jungle, and they live and prey in the jungle." (Repr. London 1977, s. 114).

8. Examples of "plebeian" cultural subversion against imperialist ideology may be found in the way basic notions like 'civilization" are being referred to in publications like the *Clarion*.Most of the time there seems to be an element of satire and sarcasm present directed against the pretentiousness of the concept. Logie Barrow has pointed out how it is highly significant when, in the *Clarion* , the term 'civilization' occurs with or without inverted commas *(The Socialism of Robert Blatchford and the "Clarion" Newspaper* , Ph. D. thesis, London 1975, 434).

9. The notion of a "polyphony of voices" is inspired by Russian formalists like Tynjanov and Bakhtin who tried to produce a more sophisticated model for studies of culture and ideology than the one provided by the "base/superstructure" scheme. Cf. M. Bakhtin: *Rabelais and his World* (Cambr., Mass. 1968). See also Raymond Williams: *Culture* (London 1981), 29, for a similar notion of culture that tries to escape elitism and to focus on conflict rather than homogeneity.

10. Most prominently Georg Lukács in *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* , op. cit. Lukács' view of romantic anti-capitalism are criticized and elaborated in F. Fehér: "Am Scheideweg des romantischen Antikapitalismus", IN: A. Heller a.o.: *Die Seele und das Leben. Studien zum frühen Lukács* , (F. a. M. 1977), M. Löwy: *Pour une sociologie des intellectuels révolutionnaires* , (Paris 1976), and P. Kaarsholm: *Kritisk erkendelse og mystifikation i Thomas Manns tidlige forfatterskab* , (Copenhagen 1977).

11. L. Thoma (ed.): *Der Burenkrieg* , (München 1900), 24.

12. L. Thoma: *Gesammelte Werke* , (München 1924), vol. 1, 452.

13. Cf. Roy Pascal: *From Naturalism to Expressionism* , (London 1973), 134ff.

14. Cf. Th. W. Adorno: *Versuch über Wagner* (1952), *Gesammelte Schriften* , vol. 13, (F. a. M. 1971), 46.

15. This refers to the Thomas of *Buddenbrooks*. The exposition of social history in e.g. *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* is slightly less brilliant and a lot more reactionary. For the ambiguities in Thomas Mann's romantic anti-capitalism, see Kaarsholm: *Kritisk erkendelse*

16. Cf. Fehér: *Am Scheideweg des Romantischen Antikapitalismus*

17. J.A. Hobson: *Confessions of an Economic Heretic*, (London 1938), 175n.

18. Ibid., p. 15.

19. J.A. Hobson: *John Ruskin Social Reformer* (1898), (London 1898), 24 and 41.

20. *Confessions*, 32ff., *Ruskin*, 43.

21. J.A. Hobson: *The War in South Africa*, (London 1900).

22. J.A. Hobson: *Imperialism. A Study*, (London 1902), 177.

23. *Ruskin*, 155f.

24. Quoted in B. Porter: *Critics or Empire*, (London 1968), 202.

25. Hobson not only anticipates Lenin, but also Rosa Luxenburg. Cf. her analysis of the South African War in *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals* (1913), (Berlin 1923), 330ff. "Auf dem Rücken der Neger wurde nun der jahrehntelange Kampf zwischen den Buren und der englischen Regierung ausgefochten .... Der alte Gegensatz zwischen Engländern und Holländern ist in dem neuen Gegensatz zwischen Kapital und Arbeit ertränkt worden: beide Nationen haben ihre rührende Verbrüderung in der Union mit der bürgerlichen und politischen Entrechtung von 5 Millionen farbiger Arbeiterbevölkerung durch eine Million weisser Ausbeuter besiegelt."

26. *The War in South Africa*, 11.

27. Ibid, 14.

28. Cf. Olive Schreiner: *Thoughts on South Africa*, London 1923), and Ruth First and Ann Scott: *Olive Schreinder*, (London 1980), 224f. and 259ff. Hobson publishes an interview with Olive Schreiner as an appendix in *The War in South Africa* and helped to arrange her husband's famous tour of England and Scotland in 1900. See S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner: *The Land of Free Speech*, (London 1906).