

The Partition of Africa: A Scramble for a Mirage?

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The issue of the causes of the late nineteenth-century European partition of Africa continues to puzzle historians. Although the rough outlines of the European colonization of Africa - also known as 'the scramble for Africa' - are well-known at the level of events, there is no even remotely discernible consensus concerning its basic nature as a historical process or its driving forces. All agree that the partition was an extraordinary surge of European imperialism. In no more than two decades at the end of the nineteenth century, European powers expanded out from the few strongholds they had along the African coastlines and divided the vast mass of the continent between them.¹ But this is about as far as the agreement extends. The ability to account for the partition has been proclaimed an acid test of theories of imperialism, and conflicting arguments have been put forward with great vehemence. It has become a minefield of rival claims and opinions which an empirically-oriented historian enters only with hesitation.

The degree of vehemence generated in the debate may be explained by the fact that there are several major questions involved and the different answers to them inform radically different views of historical relations between Europe and Africa. The question which occupies pride of place concerns the relationship between the European partition of Africa and the development of capitalism in Europe. With some oversimplification one can claim that much of the debate has been a battle between those who see a more or less direct link from the development of capitalism to the partition of Africa and those who deny such links, although it is true that there are wide disagreements of opinion on both sides of this issue. Secondly, and overlapping with this, is a question concerning the nature of the process involved. Was it a 'big bang', something that the European powers undertook suddenly by a deliberate decision, as the familiar image of the map of Africa being drawn in a conference room in Berlin suggests; or was it rather a much more unplanned and haphazard matter, in which half-reluctant powers dragged themselves from one emergency situation to another, as more recent imperial historiography maintains? Underlying such substantial issues is the crucial theoretical and methodological question about the extent to and the manner in

¹ For an excellent, concise introduction to conventional interpretations on the scramble for Africa see M.E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa*. Harlow, 1981.

which the motives and reasons of historical agents can be taken as constituting causes of historical processes.

In this short article I have no ambition to 'solve' these or other major questions concerning the partition of Africa, not to speak of European imperialist expansion more generally. But I think that at least some confusion can be cleared away by subjecting well-known things to new scrutiny and by emphasizing dimensions which have been relatively downplayed in the discussion. It seems undeniable that although the specific moves and occasions that unleashed the scramble varied from one part of the continent to another the process was conditioned by a situation of the increased international economic and political rivalry created by the unequal development of industrial capitalism. But I wish to emphasize that in order to understand how the process evolved we have to look also at the reasons and motives of the various agents involved, realizing that what mattered were expectations and not reality. The certainty of the present easily obscures the radical uncertainty in which the past decisions were made. A good case can be made for the view that the European politicians and high officials making decisions on the partition of Africa felt themselves under compulsion to act, knowing very little about what they were doing and the object of the scramble was not the real Africa but the image or illusion of Africa.

IMPERIALISM AND COLONIALISM: EXPLANATORY MODELS

The issue of African colonization has often been couched in terms of a more general debate on theories of imperialism. I do not wish to become embroiled in that debate, but instead to clear away one persistent misunderstanding. What is known as the theory of 'capitalist' or 'economic imperialism', attached to the names of J.A. Hobson and V.I. Lenin and thought to postulate the need for foreign investment as the main force propelling colonial expansion, must in this context be regarded as a straw man, constructed by its adversaries only to be spectacularly demolished before the eyes of astonished spectators.² Whatever the overall merits of the respective works of Hobson and Lenin, themselves mutually incompatible more often than not, it has been persuasively argued that these two writers were not primarily aiming to explain the partition of Africa but rather the expansion and bellicosity of the European states in a later phase, from the 1890s onwards.³ Rather

² This view has been advocated in particular by D. K. Fieldhouse. See his *The Theory of Capitalist Imperialism*. London, 1967, Introduction and *Economics and Empire 1830-1914*. 2nd ed., London, 1984 (1st ed. 1973), esp. ch. 3.

³ For Lenin, see Eric Stokes, 'Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial Expansion and the Attack on the Theory of Economic Imperialism: A Case of Mistaken Identity?', *Historical Journal* (hereafter **HJ**), 2 (1969), pp. 285-301; for Hobson, see Trevor Lloyd, 'Africa and Hobson's Imperialism', *Past and Present* (hereafter **PP**), No 55 (1972), pp. 130-153; and for a discussion of the whole question, Norman Etherington, *Theories of Imperialism: War, Conquest and Capital*. London, 1984. The original arguments of the authors are available in J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism. A study*. London, 1988 (1st ed. 1902) and V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Moscow, n.d. (Note that the original *Imperialism*, kak' novyjs hij etap' kapitalisma. St. Petersburg,

than employing the partition of Africa as the test case for theories which it was not meant to explain, I suggest that we take it as one historically particular, and not necessarily the most important, manifestation of European imperialism (the latter roughly understood as a drive for territorial expansion with state backing) and discuss it on its own merits, as a historical process of its own. Even so, there is no lack of explanatory models or approaches for this latter, narrower task.

A popular, empirically-based approach to the causes of the scramble for and partition of Africa has been made in terms of the relative weight of 'economic' and 'non-economic' motives and factors. Even if it is accepted that Hobson and Lenin were not trying in the first place to account for the division of Africa, there is no denying that their underlying argument remains highly relevant. This argument is that the economic needs of European capitalism (in Hobson's case certain 'parasitic' groups of capitalists) were the main force behind imperialist expansion. There are scholars who have adapted this perspective to the scramble for Africa by stressing the importance of those economic factors which can be readily documented from the sources, such as the need for new markets or, at a later stage, for sources of raw materials.⁴ Other writers have countered such claims by stressing a variety of 'non-economic', i.e. strategic, political, social and psychological factors, emphasizing either considerations of foreign policy and grand strategy⁵ or developments internal to the European countries, such as the rise of nationalist sentiments or racist ideologies.⁶

While many scholars have singled out a particular motive or sets of motives above the others,⁷ in the final analysis few would deny that the historical agents involved in the scramble could and did have several motives and different reasons at the same time. Probably the majority of empirical historians, acutely conscious of the complexity of real-life situations, acknowledge the existence of all the above-

1917, actually translates as 'the latest' stage of capitalism. See E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*. London, 1987, p. 12.)

⁴ Perhaps best exemplified by Leonard Woolf, *Empire and Commerce in Africa*. London, 1920, esp. pp. 24-26; and Parker T. Moon, *Imperialism and World Politics*. New York, 1926.

⁵ Historians of diplomacy and great power relations tend to see the scramble for the partition as a spillover of traditional European power politics into a new area, the continent of Africa. The paragon case for this approach is Ronald Robinson and John Callaghan with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians. The Official Mind of Imperialism*. 2nd ed., London, 1988 (1st ed. 1961). See also A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918*. Oxford, New York, 1984, pp. 294 ff. (1st ed. 1954); id., *Germany's First Bid for Colonies 1884-1885*. London, 1938, passim.

⁶ E.g. Carlton J.H. Hayes, *A Generation of Materialism, 1871-1900*. London, New York, 1941. For a discussion, see also Winfried Baumgart, *Imperialism, the Idea and Reality of British and French Colonial Expansion, 1880-1914*. Oxford, 1986, ch. 3 (*Der Imperialismus, Idee und Wirklichkeit der englischen und französischen Kolonialexpansion 1880-1914*. Wiesbaden, 1975).

⁷ Notably Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who suggests that Bismarck used colonial policy for domestic purposes as 'manipulated social imperialism', that is, as a way to integrate conflicting social and political forces and divert attention from internal social pressures created by industrialization. Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, Cologne, 1976 (1st ed. 1969) esp. pp. 112 ff. and 412 ff. While this major work remains untranslated into English, good summaries of its interpretative results are provided by Wehler himself, 'Bismarck's Imperialism 1862-1890', **Past and Present** (hereafter **PP**), 48 (1970), pp. 119-155 and id., 'Industrial Growth and Early German Imperialism', in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds, **Studies in the Theory of Imperialism**. London, 1972, pp. 71-92.

mentioned and some additional factors, arguing that in different situations they were given varying weights which are to be established in each case by empirical research.⁸

Another, more ingenious, approach has been made by suggesting that the focus of the search for causes of the scramble for Africa should be not be in Europe at all but in Africa. What is called a 'peripheral' or 'excentric' approach seeks, in contrast to earlier 'Eurocentric' explanations, economic and non-economic alike, to turn the limelight away from developments in Europe towards changes in Africa. The 'peripheralists' are not interested in trying to account for the urge to expand, taking it as a built-in feature of any great power. Instead, by looking at the receiving end of the process they endeavour to explain why expansion was directed to a particular place at a particular time. In the case of the colonization of Africa, it is suggested that internal political and economic changes in African countries in the 1870s and 1880s induced the conquest.⁹

These approaches have a varying degree of explanatory power but they cannot be simply aggregated to provide an overall explanation. While I agree with the common-sense view that factors of several types were involved and the exact nature and weight of the motivations and reasons behind decisions is an empirical question whose answer must vary from one place to another, I cannot regard all factors and reasons as *a priori* equal. They must be somehow weighted and ranked. And while I am personally inclined to give considerable significance to factors and considerations commonly considered as 'economic', I do not believe that a conceptual distinction between 'economic' and 'non-economic' factors can be meaningfully sustained. These terms are at best descriptive; to try to construct analytical arguments around them leads nowhere. One soon finds that the borderline between 'economic' and 'political' or 'strategic' becomes too blurred to explain anything. The inadequacy of these categories in the historiography of the scramble for Africa is admitted even by some of their most frequent users.¹⁰

The same is true for 'peripheral' explanations. They sound conceptually attractive in an anti-colonial age and, as will be argued below, they are indeed useful in explaining the actual course of events. But on closer inspection it becomes evident that peripheral explanations cannot work on their own and account for the initial impetus for colonization. They always entail some too often unspoken assumptions about the forces which propelled the expansion at the European end. Sometimes such assumptions may turn supposedly peripheral explanations into

⁸ E.g. G. N. Sanderson, 'The European Partition of Africa: Origins and Dynamics', in Roland Oliver and G.N. Sanderson, eds, **Cambridge History of Africa**, VI. Cambridge, 1985, pp. 96-158.

⁹ Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration', in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds, **Studies in the Theory of Imperialism**. London, 1976 (1st ed. 1972), pp. 117-142; id., 'Afterthoughts', in id. and Callagher, *Victorians*, 2nd ed., pp. 473-499; id., 'The Excentric Idea of Imperialism, with or without Empire', in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds, **Imperialism and After**. London, 1986, pp. 267-289; G.N. Uzoigwe, 'European Partition and Conquest of Africa: An Overview', in A. Adu Boahen, ed., **General History of Africa**, VII. Paris, London, Berkeley, 1985, esp. p. 27.

¹⁰ Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire*, ch. 1 fn. 1, p. 491.

apologetic attempts to absolve Europe or capitalism or both from the main responsibility for the conquest. On empirical grounds they fail to explain why the European powers suddenly became interested in the African interior which they had so far almost totally neglected. Hence we also need to recognize the European metropolitan dimension.

A more fruitful approach, I suggest, can be made by looking at the economic and social structures emerging in Europe and in Africa on the one hand and the motivations and reasons of the agents involved in the production and reproduction of these structures on the other and then by interconnecting these two lines of inquiry. In this way it will be possible to distinguish the deeper, 'structural' conditions and 'necessary' causes from the more immediate, 'conjunctural' factors and recognize the mechanisms of their interplay. On the strength of such a procedure it is possible to suggest that, whatever the weight of the 'peripheral' factors in each empirical case, ultimately the European partition of Africa not only derived its momentum from Europe but did so in a double sense: it can be seen both a part of an overall European overseas expansion propelled by the pressures unleashed by the breakthrough of industrial capitalism and a diplomatic and political race between major European capitalist powers.

INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM AND GREAT POWER RIVALRY

As everyone knows, European economy and society underwent a profound transformation during the nineteenth century. The source of this transformation was the unprecedented development of forces and relations of production that is usually referred to as the Industrial Revolution but could more properly be called the breakthrough of industrial capitalism. It led to a tremendous increase in production and productivity. Having started in the latter half of the eighteenth century in the British cotton industry, industrial capitalism spread at the turn of the century to Belgium and France and then to Germany and the United States. From the 1840s capital goods increasingly took the lead, ushering in the age of coal, steel and iron, manifested in feverish railway construction. Also other transportation and arms industries - the 'technology of imperialism' - took a qualitative leap forward.¹¹ With pardonable exaggeration it has been called 'a far more drastic break with the past than anything since the invention of the wheel'.¹² To be sure, in real life it was more protracted and complicated process, more an evolution than a revolution. Yet it meant that in the heart of Europe a new economy and new society was in the making, and strong built-in expansionary forces were unfolding within that development.

¹¹ Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire*. New York, Oxford, 1981.

¹² David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus*. Cambridge, 1985, pp. 1, 41-41 (quotation p. 42; 1st ed. 1969).

The effects of the changes unfolding in Europe were felt all over the globe. They were first seen in trade. Industrial capitalism not only furthered international trade but also changed its nature. A new international division of labour had been evolving since the 'discoveries' of America and India, but it was only during the nineteenth century that an integrated world economy took shape. With the development of communications and the concomitant great fall in transport costs, trade in expensive and exotic luxury products gave way to trade in mass-produced industrial goods and bulky primary products. Between 1820 and 1880, the value of world trade rose in real terms at an annual rate of five per cent. For Europe, trade consisted increasingly of the export of industrial goods and the import of agricultural products and, later, of raw materials. This was the time when 'colonial goods' such as coffee, tea, cocoa etc. came into everyday use in Europe.¹³ Capital also became an export commodity. In Britain, Eric Hobsbawm tells us, beginning from the 1830s "vast accumulations of capital [were] burning holes in their owners' pockets". Similar capitals, looking for places of investment abroad, were accumulated also in France and, later, in Germany.¹⁴

It is necessary to insist on the significance of these economic and social changes brought about by industrialization, self-evident though it seems; there have been several attempts in recent historiography to downplay their weight for European overseas expansion.¹⁵ But it is also important to understand that the process of economic and social change was very uneven and this unevenness created contradictions and fuelled rivalries between European nation-states. At first, the industrial revolution catapulted Britain into the lead, both economically and politically. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the newcomers, the United States and Germany in particular, were drawing closer economically, overtaking Britain in some respects. The Great Depression of 1873-1896 exacerbated the rivalry and further differentiated the growth rates of capitalist economies. During the depression Britain "ceased to be 'the workshop of the world' and became merely one of its three greatest industrial powers; and in some crucial respects, the weakest of them".¹⁶ She never recovered her old position.¹⁷

¹³ The annual per capita consumption of coffee rose between 1830 and 1910 in France from 0.30 to 2.76 kg and in Germany from 0.50 to 2.67 kg, while that of tea rose in Britain from 0.57 to 2.85 kg. The figures are extracted from a more detailed table by Paul Bairoch, 'Historical Roots of Economic Underdevelopment: Myths and Realities', in Mommsen and Osterhammel, eds, **Imperialism**, p. 201.

¹⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*. Harmondsworth, 1975 (1st ed. 1969), pp. 112 (quotation), 139; Michael Barratt Brown, *The Economics of Imperialism*. Harmondsworth, 1976, pp. 170-171.

¹⁵ This is of course the thrust of the argument of writers emphasizing political and diplomatic dimensions of the expansion, but also some writers giving more attention to economic factors claim that the role of industrial capitalism has been overemphasized, see esp. P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, 'The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas, 1750-1914', **The Economic History Review** (hereafter **EHR**), 33 (1980), esp. p. 465 and id, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas, I. The Old Colonial System, 1688-1850', **EHR**, 39 (1986), esp. pp. 501-502, 510, 523.

¹⁶ The quotation is from Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p. 127.

¹⁷ The percentages of world industrial capacity were in 1870 Britain 31.8, United States 23.3 and Germany 13.2; and in 1906-10 Britain 14.7, United States 35.3 and Germany 15.9. **Industrialization and Foreign Trade**. LON, Geneva 1942, as quoted in D.C.M. Platt, 'Economic Factors in British Policy during the "New Imperialism"', **PP**, 39 (1968), p. 137. The broad trend was same, although its speed differed, in foreign trade and

Also the European population expanded and a major change took place in the relative populations of the major powers. The late nineteenth century was a period of unprecedented and unrepeated population growth in Europe. The causes and mechanisms of this growth are debated among historians and historical demographers. What is important for us here is the overall trend and its implications. One result was that people, too, were now pushed to move over the seas to other continents; intercontinental migration accelerated considerably.¹⁸ In spite of this, the total population of Europe rose from 144 million in 1750 to 423 million in 1900. But the growth rates were uneven. The most conspicuous development in this respect was the relative decline of France and the rise of Germany. France began her 'demographic transition' a century before the other countries in Europe and its population stagnated, while that of others grew unabatedly until about 1900. During the same period Germany's population expanded rapidly and Britain's grew at a somewhat slower tempo. At the end of the century with regard to population, Germany was overshadowed in Europe only by Russia.¹⁹

The alterations in the population basis of the European powers represented a physical change affecting the number of potential workers and men under arms. There was also a socio-psychological dimension. It was during the latter part of the nineteenth century that nationalism became a major force in European politics, one manifestation of this being that people began to think in terms of national statistics. Nationalism in itself plainly was nothing new, but its appeal as a political force increased greatly while its political content was transformed. Even here it is not unreasonable to see a linkage to industrial capitalism. With its advent and the concomitant expansion of internal markets in goods and labour, European economies came increasingly to be seen as blocks which could be best managed in a national framework. Nationalism, however, was no simple 'reflection' of this need. It developed in multifarious, still inadequately understood ways.²⁰ One of them, most relevant for us here, was the emergence of what has been called 'official nationalism'. Ruling elites found it increasingly expedient to harness national sentiments, based on shared language and popularized through the spread of primary education and literacy, to the purposes of political mobilization. This was done through the device of the nation-state. Leaders in states which had long claimed a national character, such as Britain and France, put ever more emphasis on this aspect, while others, such as Germany, created quite 'new' nation-states.

Uneven socio-economic development and population growth and the rise of militant nationalism led not only to a heightened rivalry among the European states

investment, see W. Arthur Lewis, *Growth and Fluctuations 1870-1913*. London, 1978, p. 118; Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p. 139; and Barratt Brown, *Economics*, p. 171.

¹⁸ From 1800 to 1840 about one million persons moved from Europe to the United States; from 1840 to 1870, a period ten years shorter, the number of migrants was almost seven million. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p. 139.

¹⁹ For population figures, see Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery*, p. xxv and Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, p. 342.

²⁰ My own thoughts about nationalism have been clarified by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. London, 1983 and Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, pp. 41-43, 142-164. This paragraph draws on both.

but also to a shift in their internal power relations. Politically, in the European diplomatic arena, power relations tilted against France, where industrial growth remained slow and hesitant until the 1890s, and in favour of Germany. The war between France and Germany in 1870-71 effectively ended the French bid for mastery in Europe, feared ever since Napoleon.²¹ The rise of German power was given a powerful boost by the same war and by the ensuing unification of Germany as an empire under Prussia's domination. Soon the new German Empire was to eclipse such traditionally great powers as Austria-Hungary and Russia, striving for world-power status on an equal footing with Britain. Since then the growing ambitions of Germany were regarded with increasing suspicion by the leaders of most other powers, in particular Britain.²²

THE OFFICIAL MIND

Although it appears not unreasonable to expect that the European socio-economic developments were exerting powerful expansionary pressures both directly and indirectly through increased political rivalry among the European powers, such pressures do not automatically translate into political and military activities like the colonial conquest of Africa. The colonization was not produced by any blind 'structural forces' but it was consciously decided by men (in this case quite literally), historical human agents working for a variety of motives and reasons. And the men who made the ultimate historical decisions on the partition of Africa were neither industrial or other capitalists, nor lobbyists, but holders of state power, i.e. sovereigns, top ministers and a handful of high officials in the major European countries. The partition of Africa was essentially a state action, not a private venture, and in this sense undeniably a result of the workings of the 'official mind of imperialism', recalling a phrase popularized by Ronald Robinson and John Callagher in their path-breaking study *Africa and the Victorians*. In spite of the fact that 'motives' and 'reasons' are not the same thing as 'causes', there is no way of offering an explanation of the causes of the partition without probing the motives and reasons of the men who made the major decisions.

It is indeed with these motives that much of the debate about the partition of Africa has been occupied since Robinson and Callagher first penetrated 'the official mind'. The task is not quite as straightforward as it may appear. People act from a variety of motives. All of them are not conscious, let alone disclosed in the diplomatic and other written documents which historians use as their main sources.²³ It can also be suggested that while people are often motivated by a range

²¹ As discussed by Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery*, and William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments 1871-1890*. New York, 1950 (1st ed. 1931).

²² The best study of this is Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914*. London, 1982.

²³ As Bismarck once said, the remarks of diplomats are not intelligible to outsiders who do not know the persons and relationships concerned, and in any case 'the main point is always to be found in private letters and

of ideas, behind which more tangible interests can be discerned, their action is conditioned by the structural circumstances in which historical processes take place. These considerations create several problems for the historian. One is that such circumstances are commonly so much part and parcel of the everyday fabric of life that people take them for granted and remain only partially, if at all, conscious of them. Hence they also fail to alert the historian. This was no doubt the case with the partition of Africa. Robinson and Callagher found that the recorded arguments of European ministers and their advisors 'did not always bring out fully their unconscious assumptions [and] there are many things too well understood between colleagues to be written down'.²⁴ This means that we cannot rely merely on the explicit statements of the historical agents, but must also pay attention to things which were mentioned in passing or not at all, and which were only manifested in actions.

If there is one conclusion which emerges from the extensive study of diplomatic correspondence, it is that the men who embodied the official mind were not thinking as much in terms of rates of profit and monetary inputs and outputs, as in terms of power and prestige and, ultimately, war and peace. It is not for nothing that the historians of diplomacy are fond of speaking of the 'chessboard of European power politics'. But if it was a game, it was one with very real stakes. The agents themselves claimed, and probably thought, that they were furthering their respective 'national interests'. It was left undefined, however, what such interests consisted of and how they were formed. No doubt the politicians were not immune to the needs of economic expansion. They had many business and personal links with their capitalists and regarded the class interests of the latter as an important ingredient of the 'national interest'. 'Finally ... each state stands for the interests of its industry', the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck noted at the end of his political career.²⁵ Ultimately the politicians, whether conservative or liberal, sided with the existing socio-economic order.

But although links obviously existed between politicians and high officials on the one hand and capitalists on the other and affected decisions in many cases, there is no need to postulate a constant one-way direction of influence. Nothing suggests that major political decisions would always have been manipulated by sinister networks of powerful pressure groups representing capitalist and other entrenched interests or that politicians and officials would have been acting as front men for capitalists in general or for certain groups of capitalists.²⁶ Rather the politicians had to look after the total interests of the existing order and take into account all the partial interests of which these consisted. With regard to Africa their room to

confidential messages, including spoken ones, all of which does not appear in files'. In a private conversation, 22 January 1871. Moritz Busch, *Tagebuchblätter*, II. Leipzig, 1899, p. 171.

²⁴ Robinson and Callagher, *Victorians*, 2nd ed., pp. 19-20.

²⁵ Bismarck, 5 July 1890, as quoted in Wehler, *Bismarck*, p. 182.

²⁶ E.g. in the case of Bismarck, Fritz Stern has cleverly argued that in the relationship between the Chancellor and his banker Gerson Bleichröder, it was the former who was the dominating influence. Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron. Bismarck, Bleichröder and the Building of the German Empire*. Harmondsworth, 1987 (1st ed. 1977).

manoeuvre was even larger because the majority of capitalists were looking for 'far brighter horizons than any found in Africa'.²⁷ Hence there is no reason to deny the considerable or even decisive part which considerations that are commonly termed strategic and political played in the decisions leading to the partition of Africa. Vast areas were conquered in which no significant economic advantage for capitalists of the conquering country emerged.

However, one should go beneath the diplomatic surface and ask what were the social contents of the strategic and political considerations involved. As was argued above, categories such as 'economic', 'strategic' or 'political' are inadequate for analytical purposes in seeking an explanation of the partition for Africa. The inadequacy derives from the fact that policies and strategies are predominantly not aims in themselves but means to aims which are found elsewhere. To speak of 'strategic' or 'political' factors is to explain little, if one stops short of probing the nature of the aims which the strategies and policies in question were geared to serve. As acknowledged even by Robinson and Callagher, one does not have to penetrate the allegedly 'political' or 'strategic' decisions very deeply in order to realize their socio-economic embeddedness. If, for instance, many actions of the British during the scramble for Africa can best be explained by their desire to safeguard the sea routes to India, was this not related to the fact that the Indian Empire was of primary importance to the British economy?²⁸

Even more to the point here, European political decision-makers were by no means immune to direct commercial considerations. If some decisions cannot be explained by the immediate economic interests of capitalists in the countries concerned, there were also many decisions which cannot be explained without reference to those interests. In fact, commercial considerations were rapidly becoming part of international politics. Occasionally the representatives of the state felt themselves obliged to push the inactive capitalists who showed little inclination to pour money into unknown lands as long as they found room for economic expansion in other, better known and hence safer areas. 'The truth is,' complained Sir Percy Anderson, head of the African Department in the British Foreign Office and chief architect of British African policy in the 1880s and 1890s, 'that we not only do not neglect the Manchester interests, but have to stir Manchester up to look after its interests'.²⁹

In retrospect it has often been suggested that the main economic interest for the Europeans in Africa was raw materials. Contemporaries, however, were very little, if at all, preoccupied with them. Instead, they were concerned with market areas. The scramble took place in the 1880s, in the midst of what has come to be called the Great Depression of 1873-1896. The reality of this depression as an integrated phenomenon in economic history has been doubted by later scholars, but its

²⁷ Robinson and Callagher, *Victorians*, p. 16.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 470-471, 474.

²⁹ A minute by Sir Percy Anderson, 3 November 1885, Public Record Office, London (hereafter PRO), FO 403/95, 7.

meaning was not lost on its contemporaries.³⁰ While not a drastic economic collapse plunging masses of people into destitution, it was a prolonged period of depressed prices and profits, 'a crisis of the rich rather than the poor'.³¹ A key variable to be manipulated in order to find a way to recovery was widely seen in markets: safeguarding domestic markets and opening new markets abroad.³² Both were regarded as belonging to the purview of the state; indeed they were among the few means by which the late nineteenth-century states could intervene in the workings of the economy. The European states, with the major exception of Britain, began to erect protective tariff walls from the late 1870s onwards. But such protective measures discriminated against foreign traders and producers and thus added fuel to emerging rivalries. When the more protective-minded powers such as France and Portugal tried to extend their high tariffs to some areas in Africa, not only traders but also political decision-makers in economically stronger states such as Britain and Germany were alarmed. 'The customs barriers of others: that, on the economic plane, is the major obsession which preoccupies the minds of those concerned.'³³

THE UNOFFICIAL MIND

The official mind became interested in Africa relatively late. The same is true of the capitalist part of the unofficial mind. Apart from a limited number of traders and ship owners on selected coastlines, virtually no European businessmen engaged in activities in Africa and even these were activated to pressure their governments only towards the end of the nineteenth century. Yet there were European voices attracting attention to Africa before. These came from quarters and motives that can be called 'humanitarian', 'scientific' and 'personal', though it has to be acknowledged that such categories are loose and often overlapping with varying social content.

The humanitarian case for Africa derived partly from the British anti-slavery campaign. Its origins and causes are complex and need not be discussed here.³⁴ Let us merely note that the abolitionist argument was extended to include a concern not only for the African slaves but for Africa: the slave trade and slavery were to be

³⁰ For doubts, based on the fact that different economic indicators behaved in a far from unified way in different countries during this period, see e.g. S.B. Saul, *The Myth of the Great Depression, 1873-1896*. London, Basingstoke, 1982 (1st ed. 1969) and, following him, Baumgart, *Imperialism*, pp. 143, 156-164; for a discussion of contemporary views, Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire*, pp. 34 ff.

³¹ As a contemporary observer put it, Julius Wolf, *Die gegenwärtige Wirtschaftskrisis*. Tübingen, 1888, as quoted in Hans Rosenberg, *Grosse Depression und Bismarckzeit*. Berlin, 1967, p. 47.

³² For Britain, see the replies by the Chambers of Commerce of Birmingham and Manchester to the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the Depression of Trade and Industry, 1885-86, document 16 in Chamberlain, *Scramble*, pp. 129-130; for Germany, see Wehler, *Bismarck*, pp. 230 ff. and 423 ff.

³³ Jean Stengers, 'L'impérialisme colonial de la fin du XIX^e siècle: mythe ou réalité', **Journal of African History** (hereafter **JAH**), 3 (1962), p. 485.

³⁴ For a useful short introduction to the discussion, see Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*. Nairobi, 1981, pp. 24-33.

attacked at their roots, inside the 'dark continent'.³⁵ Another major strand of humanitarianism, often intermingled with abolitionism, was represented by the Christian missions. Major British missionary societies, which had sprung from the religious revival in the late eighteenth century, went to work first in South and West Africa and in the 1840s in East Africa, to be followed by the French, the Germans and the others. Most, however, remained on or near the coast; it was only in the 1870s and 1880s that the missions to a larger extent penetrated the African interior.³⁶

Scientific interest was at first primarily geographical: filling in the white spaces on the 'Africa maps'. *The Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa* was founded in London in 1788 and merged in 1830 with the newly-founded *Royal Geographical Society*; the *Société de Géographie* was established in Paris in 1821 and the *Gesellschaft für Erdkunde* in Berlin in 1828. These societies and many later ones dispatched expeditions to the interior of Africa which were sometimes financially supported by their respective governments. Those who were successful brought back material for the maps to be drawn by home-based geographers.³⁷ Later also representatives of other sciences, especially anthropology, were furnished with materials from exotic lands by African explorers.

The travellers themselves were a mixed collection. Some subscribed to humanitarian ideals and harboured scientific ambitions; many were drawn to Africa by 'a hope of gain, a love of adventure and just plain curiosity'.³⁸ Yet humanitarianism, scientific ambition or human curiosity were by no means incompatible with self-seeking or plans of economic exploitation or political intervention. References to the commercial potential of the area can be found in works by the earliest travellers. In East Africa, for instance, the first major British expedition into the interior, undertaken by Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke in 1857 to 1859, was expected to produce not only geographical information but also 'commercial, and it may be, political advantages'. It was sponsored not only by the Royal Geographical Society but also by the Foreign Office and, indirectly, the East India Company.³⁹ Burton came back convinced that East Africa was 'a region boundless in commercial resources, and bounded in commercial development only by the stereotyped barbarism of its inhabitants'; Speke, after his second voyage a few years later, argued that East Africans could survive only if 'a government... like ours in India' were be formed for them.⁴⁰ Others, like David Livingstone, entertained more

³⁵ Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa*. Madison, 1964, pp. 299-303; Suzanne Miers, *Britain and the Ending of the Slave Trade*. New York, 1975, pp. 30-33, 203-204.

³⁶ E.g. C. P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa, I*. London, 1948, pp. 178 ff.

³⁷ Franz-Josef Schulte-Althoff, *Studien zur politischen Wissenschaftsgeschichte der deutschen Geographie im Zeitalter des Imperialismus*. Paderborn, 1971, pp. 17-20.

³⁸ Chamberlain, *Scramble*, p. 25.

³⁹ Correspondence in PRO, FO 2 (quotation from 'East African Expedition. Expedition Committee, April 12th 1856', FO 2, 6); Richard Burton, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa, I*. New York 1961, p. 5. (1st ed. London, 1860)

⁴⁰ Richard Burton, *Zanzibar, II*. London, 1872, pp. 295-296; John Hanning Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile*. London, 1975, p. 8 (1st ed. 1863).

diffuse schemes of colonization. Livingstone wanted to open 'a path for commerce and christianity' and establish on the Malawian highlands colonies of God-fearing British settlers around which 'industrious natives would gladly settle'.⁴¹

In the works of later travellers and men on the spot, the call for commercial exploitation, with or without political intervention, was intensified. Some of these men became later what were called colonial enthusiasts; others remained vaguer in the schemes they advocated. They added a new dimension to the argument, suggesting not only that Europe needed Africa but also that Africa needed Europe. Practically all of them were convinced of their own superiority vis-à-vis the indigenous inhabitants, and they saw this superiority not only in cultural but also in racial terms. In their writings they tended to paint life in Africa in dark colours, 'Hobbesian in its harshness and primeval in the dominance of nature over man'. Humanitarians felt their superiority as much as anyone; they have been aptly called people who wished 'to do unquestioned good from positions of leadership'.⁴² In spite of great diversity in the views of early travellers, the overall conclusion from their writings was inescapable: Africa needed vigorous European intervention.

Most early advocates of schemes of commercial exploitation and political intervention were not personally capitalists and did not speak with any wish for personal monetary profit; they gained their self-gratification elsewhere. Yet one can see an intimate if indirect link between such proposals and the development of industrial capitalism. The arguments underlying them were mostly derived from economic and social pressures created by developments in Europe. The suggestions often bore a striking resemblance to what has later come to be known as 'social imperialism'. They advocated the 'opening up' - this was the favourite phrase - of African markets or the linking of a part of European emigration to Africa as a means of relieving the distressed condition of working classes in Europe and, by implication, keeping them from falling victim to socialist agitation. Even Livingstone, who is usually considered the explorer most concerned with African welfare, understood his vision of flourishing agricultural communities to be set up in Central Africa as a measure to improve the condition of the poor in Britain.⁴³

Market arguments intensified among the travellers in the late 1870s and 1880s when also a few genuine capitalists joined in the agitation. Africa, with her scantily clad millions of inhabitants, provided insatiable markets for European manufactures, Henry M. Stanley argued. The only question was whether it was the cotton spinners of Manchester who were to clothe them or whether someone else was to seize the market opportunity.⁴⁴ This was seen not merely as an economic but also a social issue. As put by another explorer, V.L. Cameron: '[S]hould England, with her mills working half-time and with distress in the manufacturing districts, neglect the opportunity of opening a market which would give employment to

⁴¹ The argument and quotations are from H. Alan C. Cairns, *Prelude to Imperialism. British Reactions to Central African Society 1840-1890*. London, 1965, pp. 195-196.

⁴² I follow Cairns' argument, *Prelude*, esp. pp. xxii-xiii, 21.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-199.

⁴⁴ William G. Hynes, *The Economics of Empire*. London, 1979, p. 67.

thousands of the working classes?⁴⁵ At the same time some traders already working in Africa felt the pinch of the depression in the form of falling prices and embarked on a drive of market expansion. It was little wonder they soon came into conflict with each other and with local traders and turned to their governments for help and protection. This was most apparent and has been best analysed on the West African coast where commercial rivalry was at its fiercest.⁴⁶

FROM SCRAMBLE TO PARTITION

That the late nineteenth-century European expansion was directed to Africa was not surprising. It was directed wherever there was any room for it, and Africa was a major blank area. Of course, Africa had participated in the international economy for a long time.⁴⁷ Before the discovery of the New World, West Africa had provided most of the gold which was needed for the monetization of the medieval Mediterranean economy; after the discovery she had provided slave labour for European plantations and mines established in the New World. But in the breakthrough of industrial capitalism and its subsequent spread, the direct role of Africa had been minor. After the abolition of the slave trade in the course of the nineteenth century the bulk of international trade as well as almost all transfers of people and capital took place between European countries themselves or between them and their white-ruled 'dominions' and the independent countries of North and South America and, to a lesser extent, the Middle and Far East.⁴⁸ To be sure, a 'legitimate trade' mainly in palm oil and other oil crops sprang up between parts of the West African coast and Europe, while on the East Coast trade in ivory and slaves not only continued but intensified. Yet the Europeans perceived Africa as a series of 'coasts' - Gold Coast, Slave Coast, Swahili Coast. The vast interior, in particular 'Central' Africa between the northern and southern tips of the continent, remained an empty space on the white man's map, largely outside the circuit of capital. It was this coastal 'hinterland' which was now seen as the prime object of expansion.

Yet this does not explain why the conquest of Africa happened in the manner it did - why the whole mass of Africa was divided among European imperialist powers in a rather offhand manner into forty-odd arbitrary entities and how the locations and borders of the latter were determined. Here I think the weight of 'excentric' factors must be recognized and the focus has to be shifted to conditions in Africa and the activities of various 'subimperialists' and other men on the spot. In doing so it will be helpful to see the 'scramble' and the 'partition' as two different

⁴⁵ Verney Lovett Cameron, *Across Africa*, I. London, 1877, p. 209.

⁴⁶ A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa*. London, 1975, pp. 153-166.

⁴⁷ I draw here mainly on J. Forbes Munro, *Africa and the International Economy 1800-1960*. London, 1976, and Ralph Austen, *African Economic History*. London, 1987.

⁴⁸ See W. Arthur Lewis, *The Evolution of the International Economic Order*. Princeton, 1978, pp. 4-7; Platt, *Economic Factors*, passim.

phases of the same process of expansion leading to full-scale 'colonization'. On the one hand, the 'scramble' can be seen as the earlier competitive phase in which various Europeans carved out widening spheres of interests for themselves in Africa; whereas, on the other, the 'partition' was the negotiated solution of their governments to the danger of the scramble getting out of control. These distinctions also may enable us to take stand on the discussion as to whether the Berlin Africa Conference from November 1884 to February 1885 really 'divided' Africa or not.⁴⁹

In this perspective, the scramble started in the form of private or local official or semiofficial ventures in Africa itself and its initial directions greatly shaped its subsequent course. There is room for debate as to when the first shot was fired. The most attractive possibilities include 1876 when King Leopold II of Belgium launched his African adventure by convening the *Conférence de Géographie*, or 1879 when the French drive from Senegal to Western Sudan began. In any case it is apparent that the scramble was in full swing when the British occupied Egypt in 1882, something which makes it rather difficult to accept the thesis of Robinson and Callagher that the partition must be regarded as the inadvertent result of a chain reaction set off by the occupation of Egypt.⁵⁰ But the occupation can be seen as an important step towards the partition. As it drew the British state into African affairs to a much larger degree than before, it also made Africa an amenable subject in European balance-of-power politics. When the activities of Leopold and advances of the French continued and intensified, coupled with the reactivation of the old colonial claims by Portugal at the mouth of the Congo and, above all, the belated entry of the Germans into the scramble, the need for some regulation became acute.

But it appears that even when the metropolitan governments joined in the scramble, their first priority was to create a framework for the activities of private and local official and semiofficial agents. If this is accepted, many of the anomalies and paradoxes of the Berlin Africa Conference in 1884-85 become understandable. Officially the Berlin Conference did not divide Africa. Convened by Bismarck, the most powerful statesman of Europe, the conference decided to set up a vast 'free trade' area in the Congo basin and guarantee the freedom of navigation on the Congo and Niger rivers. But the scramble was going on all the time and the Berlin Conference surely made a major contribution in turning it into partition. The Conference agreed on rules which were to be used in 'taking possession' of lands in Africa, insisting on 'effective occupation' of the territories

⁴⁹ This question remained unresolved in the most authoritative scholarly conference ever held on the subject (Berlin, 1985). See Stig Förster, Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Ronald Robinson, eds, **Bismarck, Europe and Africa. The Berlin Africa Conference 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition**. London, 1988, esp. Robinson, 'The Conference in Berlin and the Future of Africa, 1884-1885', and the contributions mentioned by him in p. 2 fn. 4.

⁵⁰ The original thesis is found in Robinson and Callagher, *Victorians*, passim. and esp. p. 465. It has been heavily criticized, beginning from the first reviews, see e.g. Stengers, L'imperialisme colonial; C.W. Newbury, 'Victorians, Republicans and the Partition of West Africa', **JAH**, 3 (1962), pp. 493-501; and A.G. Hopkins, 'The Victorians and Africa: A Reconsideration of the Occupation of Egypt, 1882', **JAH**, 27 (1986), esp. pp. 389-390. Also Robinson has indulged in some self-criticism, but he still wants to stick to his 'Egyptian baton', id. and Callagher, **Victorians**, 2nd ed., pp. 477-479. For East Africa, see also M.E. Chamberlain, 'Clement Hill's Memoranda and the British Interest in East Africa', **The English Historical Review**, 87 (1972), pp. 533-547.

claimed by various powers. Although the actual boundaries between the territories were left to be decided in a series of intrainperialist agreements, some were initially concluded in lobbies in Berlin, especially those regarding Leopold's 'state without customs'. Yet the legal status of these territories was left open and the hope was entertained, especially by Germany and Britain, that a state-run colonization could be averted and that the division of Africa into spheres of influence would bring order into the chaos of the scramble and guarantee the free access of all interested parties to whatever resources Africa might possess.⁵¹

The active role of the 'unofficial mind' and local agents in this process, both before and after the Berlin Conference, was evident even in the cases of France, Belgium and Portugal where the contribution from the metropolitan state was apparently at its greatest. France had begun its colonial conquest in Algeria and Senegal well before the onset of the scramble and had many metropolitan politicians such as Charles de Freycinet and Jules Ferry who had an interest in further expansion. Yet much of the French drive to the inner parts of Africa originated from the subimperialist ambitions of soldiers or administrators in Senegal or ambitious explorers such as Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza in Congo, and the main agents of French colonization were to be chartered companies.⁵² In Belgium the driving force was King Leopold himself, who acted purely in his personal capacity rather than as a representative of the state. The main explorer he hired was Stanley, to whom he allowed a substantial discretion to entertain subimperialist ambitions of his own.⁵³ Even in the fiercely protective Portuguese colonial empire there was a significant local group pressing for expansion, namely the colonial or 'creole' bourgeoisie, who were suffering from the end of the illegal slave trade and the trade slump.⁵⁴

In the case of free-trading Britain and economically ascendant Germany, the official reluctance to be drawn into formal colonization in Africa was apparent. Britain was used to control most of the accessible regions of Africa through what has been known an informal empire, 'without being put to the inconvenience of protectorates or anything of that sort'.⁵⁵ Even after the Berlin Conference by far the greatest acquisitions were made by colonial companies set up by influential individuals such as the Royal Niger Company of George Goldie and the Imperial South Africa Company of Cecil Rhodes both of which were officially backed up by

⁵¹ This reading is based on various contributions in Förster et al., eds, **Bismarck**.

⁵² C.W. Newbury and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, 'French Policy and the Origins of the Scramble for West Africa', **JAH**, 10 (1969), pp. 253-276; A.S. Kanya-Forstner, 'French African Priorities and the Berlin West Africa Conference', Förster et al., eds, **Bismarck** pp. 171-187.

⁵³ See various publications by Jean Stengers, e.g. *L'imperialisme colonial*; 'King Leopold's Imperialism', Owen and Sutcliff, eds, **Imperialism**, pp. 248-276; and 'Leopold II and the **Association Internationale du Congo**', Förster et al. eds, pp. 229-244.

⁵⁴ Gervase Clarence-Smith, 'The Portuguese and Spanish Roles in the Scramble for Africa: An Economic Interpretation', Förster et al. eds, **Bismarck**, p. 217.

⁵⁵ As nostalgically remarked by the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury in the House of Lords, 10 July 1890, quoted in G.N. Sanderson, 'British Informal Empire, Imperial Ambitions, Defensive Strategies, and the Anglo-Portuguese Congo Treaty of February 1884', Förster et al., eds, **Bismarck**, p. 189.

a charter.⁵⁶ Also Bismarck had long dragged his feet against colonial acquisitions. Even after having embarked on his colonial drive, he claimed that he did not intend to establish what he called 'colonies in the French sense' - formally subjugated areas administered by a bureaucracy and policed by an army from the subjugating country. Chartered colonial companies, not Prussian officials and officers, were to be also his major means of colonization.⁵⁷

The initial hesitancy of European politicians to be drawn into official colonization was hardly due to a respect for the rights of weaker peoples or an aversion on principle to the use of force in international relations. A far more weighty reason, I wish to suggest, was the radical uncertainty with which the decisions were made. It was a matter of expectations, not of realities. This emerges clearly from the documents and the literature. The inner parts of Africa were colonized not for what was *known* to be there but for what was *assumed might* be there.⁵⁸ No wonder: the realities were not known. The economic value of Africa was unclear and its strategic or political value could be evaluated in widely varying ways. The assessments by travellers were conflicting. Against colonial lobbyists like Stanley and Cameron and others who spoke of 'unspeakable richness' and 'vast fortunes' buried in Central Africa, there were many clear-headed explorers, such as Joseph Thomson, who thought that Central Africa might well be happy to receive European textiles and other industrial goods, but she had 'nothing to give in return'.⁵⁹ Few if any politicians were convinced by the most glowing arguments of colonial enthusiasts; yet they dared not overlook the possibility that Africa might after all have some economic and other value, if not immediately then at least in the longer run. At least they had to prevent the other powers from excluding them from something potentially valuable.

This configuration gave rise to dynamics which led the European powers to commit themselves more and more deeply to involvement in Africa. Economically stronger states such as Britain and Germany tried to keep the economically weaker states such as France and Portugal from excluding their traders from potential markets in Africa. But as the latter states were pushing ahead with new acquisitions and were not willing to waive their protective policies, the only way to keep the maximum amount of Africa open appeared to be to divide it into 'spheres of influence' and see that most of these came into the possession of such states which did not discriminate against foreign traders. This explains why Leopold was able to

⁵⁶ John Flint, 'Chartered Companies and the Transition from Informal Sway to Colonial Rule in Africa', Förster et al., **Bismarck**, pp. 69-83.

⁵⁷ The best account of Bismarck's colonial policy remains Wehler, *Bismarck*. The quotation is from Bismarck in the Reichstag, 28 November 1885, *Die politischen Reden des Fürsten Bismarck*, ed. Horst Kohl, XI, Stuttgart, 1894, p. 281.

⁵⁸ Sanderson, *Partition*, pp. 101-106 (in general); Wehler, *Bismarck*, pp. 446-450 (Germany); Platt, *Economic Factors*, pp. 125-126 (Britain); A.S. Kanya-Forstner, 'French Military Imperialism in the Western Sudan', in **The Theory of Imperialism and the European Partition of Africa**. Proceedings of a seminar held in the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 1967, p. 49; id, 'French Expansion in Africa: The Mythical Theory', Owen and Sutcliffe, eds, **Imperialism**, pp. 277-294.

⁵⁹ Joseph Thomson, *To the Central African Lakes and Back, II*. London, 1881, p. 285.

carve out such a huge territory for himself in the heart of Africa. From the point of view of Britain and Germany he was the least evil. Yet the partition into spheres of influence inevitably meant that one power was granted a preferred position within a certain area, and the other powers admitted to being to some extent disadvantaged there. It did not last long before both Bismarck and the British Foreign Secretary Lord Rosebery were employing mining language when presenting a rationale for acquisitions in Africa. Both called them 'pegging out claims'.⁶⁰ Or as Carl Peters, the 'founder' of German East Africa, put it: the partition was 'land speculation... on a grand scale' by the European powers.⁶¹

As we know, Africa was not only partitioned but colonized. Very soon European states had to take full responsibility for the translation of the paper partition and 'spheres of influence' into effective colonization on the ground. In this process many of the resolutions of the Berlin Conference were violated, especially those concerning free trade and freedom of navigation. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to follow the course of the actual colonization. Let us only note the logic behind it. The partitioners had overlooked two things: Africa was not empty and to exploit African resources these had first to be developed. In order to deal with various widely different reactions and actions of the African peoples, ranging from cooperation to open resistance, and to develop the resources, colonial states had to be set up. And in order to run colonial states, revenues were needed. Under such circumstances, chartered companies were an inadequate instrument for colonial exploitation and no states without customs were possible.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

It has been my concern in this article to indicate some of the causal mechanisms which led to the partition of Africa among European powers in the late nineteenth century. My main argument has been that the process should be understood as an interplay between structural conditions and personal motives and reasons. These created a web of 'necessary' and 'sufficient' causes acting on one another. The process was conditioned by structural changes unfolding in European economy and polity. It could have hardly happened without the expansionary economic pressures and the increased political rivalry created by the breakthrough of industrial capitalism. The form it took was decisively shaped by other factors. It was largely initiated by the men on the spot - subimperialist soldiers and administrators, traders, explorers, even missionaries. It is impossible to imagine that the map of Africa would have become the same without the initial activity of these private agents. Yet the ultimate decisions were made by other men - European politicians and high officials whose motives were rather different and many of whom at first tried to

⁶⁰ Bismarck in Reichstag, 26 January 1889, *Die politischen Reden*, XII, p. 587; Rosebery in a speech in 1893, as quoted in Baumgart, *Imperialism*, p. 42.

⁶¹ Peters, to be sure, spoke of speculation by the nations, or peoples: 'Terrainspekulationen der Völker', *Das Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Schutzgebiet*. Leipzig, Munich, 1895, p. 10.

avoid a too close engagement in Africa. I have tried to show how these various structural and personal factors and local and metropolitan dimensions came together and produced the outcome they did.

I have also argued that the European partitioners of Africa were more driven by visions than by realities and that the Africa they had before their eyes was a mirage. Indeed, what was a partition from the European point of view was more of a unification from the African point of view. When the Europeans divided Africa among themselves into spheres of influence soon to be effectively colonized, they at the same time initiated the construction of political units which were much larger than most of the traditional polities, encompassing within their boundaries innumerable old societies with a great deal of historical and cultural diversity. Eventually, of course, the mirage was transformed into reality and - the final irony - the units artificially created by European imperialists were taken over by African nationalists. But this was the result of later colonial development.

It would be tempting, though unfashionable, to see the European partition of Africa as something of a historical necessity. Given the premises, what else could the outcome have been? Yet one can also argue that the relationship between most factors in the process was contingent rather than necessary. To show how something happened is not to argue that this also had to happen. But certainly the case of the partition of Africa shows once more how history is 'the result of human action, not of human design',⁶² how the partly or wholly conscious motives and reasons of historical agents do not necessarily match the unacknowledged interests and conditions guiding and influencing their behaviour and how the consequences of action may not bear much relation to the original intentions.

⁶² A phrase originating from the writings of Adam Ferguson and elaborated by F.A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*. London, 1967, pp. 96-105.