BELLE EPOQUE, FIN-DE-SIÈCLE, IMPERIALISM,
LECTURE

I. Purpose and overview of lecture

A. To make some broad generalizations about post-Victorian trends

B. The title is unwieldy, but it refers to various terms that have been applied to the decades at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, up to 1914

1. As with the term “Victorian,” there are important national variations, and when the Victorian period blends into something else is not sharp or distinct

   a) 1914 is clearly the end of the period, but its beginning is less clear

   b) I will be talking today of the period from the mid-1870s to 1914

C. Meaning of the terms often used for these years:

1. *Belle Epoque* (“beautiful epoch” in French)

   a) Refers especially to the generation before WWI, when life in France was remembered as unusually sweet or beautiful

2. *Fin-de-siècle* (“end of century” in French)

   a) Here there is more of an implication of decadence (and worry about decadence is common in France, even more in Germany and Austria-Hungary)

3. I might have added “Wilhelmian” or “Edwardian” (although I am referring to the 1880s, even the 1870s; Wilhelm II took over in 1890; Edward VII only in 1901)

4. Imperialism, too, might usefully be defined, to start off

   a) It has to do with having an “empire,” or other countries dominated and ruled over by one “imperial” country

   b) There are already many empires in Europe – Austro-Hungarian, Russian, German, Turkish, British, and the somewhat bogus Second Empire of Napoleon III

   c) The imperialism of this period has to do with rapidly expanding European domination of non-European
areas

D. To explore a bit more the issue of bourgeois hypocrisy (not only in the family but in rationalization of imperial domination – White man’s burden, etc.)

E. To explore further the issue of European superiority, real and imagined, especially by looking at the issue of European racism

1. Was race the ultimate explanation of Europe’s superiority to other regions of the world?
   a) And did that racial superiority mean, in social-darwinistic terms, that Europe had the right and obligation to take over the rest of the world?

II. The growing power of the industrializing West over the non-European areas

A. The superiority of the West in certain concrete, measurable ways is perhaps the first thing that needs to be recognized about this period

1. Europeans, especially western Europeans, were able to dominate much of the rest of the world because they had become so powerful
   a) This was above all militarily
   b) But also economically, and in directly related ways (European technology, state bureaucracies, etc.)

B. Note that the term “West” refers especially to certain areas of Europe (most of all England, France, and Germany, with the problematic status of Russia and eastern Europe)

1. Japan also emerges as a new imperial power – and it is not of course western (though quite explicitly copying the West in certain regards, and prompted to do so by western imperialism)

C. In a less obvious way Europeans also showed what might be termed superiority – they reproduced with remarkable fecundity and then moved in unprecedented numbers to other parts of the globe

1. And again it is where the western Europeans move that the most powerful countries develop, above all the United States

2. Some non-European areas also see a rapid population growth, but not such an impressive one, nor such an
impressive migration

a) The Chinese and Indians are two examples (into Southeast Asia and East Africa), but they do not have quite the same impact, especially not in the nineteenth century

b) In particular, they don’t have a powerful homeland to forward their interests

D. This superiority began to impress many observers by the early 18th century, and Europeans themselves began to discuss and theorize about it:

1. Were modern Europeans in fact “greater” than the ancient Greeks and Romans (up to this time the standard for most things)?

2. Were the Chinese or American Indians in some (though very different) ways superior?
   a) There was the notion of the “noble savage,” and various admiring (though not very knowledgeable) descriptions of the Chinese, to be found in these discussions and theories

E. As the answer, “Yes, we are superior,” began to prevail, the next obvious question was, Why?

1. That question is to a degree still being asked, but one direction (only one) that the answer took was “because of our superior racial qualities”

F. Not all Europeans believed they were superior racially or permanently, but large, probably increasing numbers of them did for much of the 19th century

1. Claims to inherent superiority ran up against several obvious objections:
   a) Other parts of the world had once been superior to Europeans, even if now inferior to them, so it was clearly not an issue of permanent superiority
      (1) One explanation put forward was that those areas had become racially corrupt or mixed in race—Gobineau’s writings emphasized that, as did H.S. Chamberlain’s
   b) Christian universalism (a belief that all races of humanity were God’s children, all had souls, etc.) also opposed concepts of racial superiority
   c) Secular humanistic universalism (again, accepting
as axiomatic that all people are equal in worth, and
more than that, can change to become like others –
cultural adaptability)

2. Many Europeans who thought of themselves as superior,
in short, did not see it necessarily as an inherent or
permanent superiority

a) Such rejection of racist views was mostly the
position of the left, especially the socialists

b) But they too tended to think of a “civilizing mission”
(this is a French notion especially) – perhaps not
quite so crude as “White Man’s Burden,” but still
related

III. Influential changes and shifts of the 1870s and 1880s

A. What further needs to be understood about this post-Victorian
period of the late 19th century is that the liberal hegemony of the
1850s and 1860s begins to be challenged from many directions

1. As we have seen, of course, liberalism was always
weaker or less “complete” in Germany and France than in
Great Britain

a) Germany moved even farther away from liberal
ideals, from the mid-1870s on, especially in certain
cultural aspects

2. Germany’s rise and its challenge to other countries,
France most strikingly, but soon enough Great Britain
(e.g., the naval race) was symbolic of a new, anti-liberal
force in Europe

B. New “irrationalist” trends

1. These were especially notable in German-speaking
Europe, but they were in evidence everywhere

a) Sometimes termed “anti-positivist,” this trend
tended to cast doubt on the reliability of reason, the
ability of science to unravel all things, the
attractiveness and usefulness of freedom (in the
market, but also in many other realms)

C. The Great Depression of 1873 to early 1890s

1. There was a market crash in 1873 and then troubled
economies throughout much of the 1870s and 1880s

2. Not in fact a depression on the scale of the 1930s

a) Rather, it was more a decline in the rate of growth
(with some particularly troubled economic sectors) than an absolute decline (as would be the case in the 1930s)

3. But this shock to the liberal economic system tended to put much else about the liberal faith into question

4. And revealingly the depression hit Germany especially hard, further supporting its anti-liberal tendencies
   a) One sign of the times (to be further explored in the next lecture): Anti-Semitic parties begin to appear, using racial hatred and resentment as a political device, with important anti-capitalist themes (Jews as exploitative capitalists, etc.)

D. Anti-liberal political trends, “mass democracy”
   1. Other anti-liberal parties also begin to appear or grow much stronger – Christian socials and social democrats most notably
   2. Also a range of “radical” or populist parties that look to greater state action in the economy, suspicion of large capitalists, urging protectionism of various sorts
   3. All of these parties appeal to the masses, and they tend to use emotion, resentment, class and race hatred, demagogy
   4. They all look, in other words, to the 20th century Age of the Masses

IV. Why imperialism? (origins, background, appeals)
   A. One simple answer: Imperialism was simply a natural or integral part of the anti-liberal trends of the time
      1. Imperialism thus drew from racism, social-darwinism, fears about economic depression, the rise of mass politics, etc.
      2. A number of conservative politicians in particular believed they could rally popular support to conservatism generally by building an empire
         a) Such beliefs were of course already there with Napoleon III, though not with Bismarck, until his final years in office
         b) No doubt, large elements of the common people took pride in being part of a superior race, of being an imperial people
3. Others believed that having an empire tended to unite a country, reduce its class conflict, etc.

B. Economic motives
1. Again, this might seem obvious:
   a) Europeans hoped to exploit the rest of the world, especially at a time when the European economy seemed to be in trouble
   b) And there were many raw materials in the non-European world that Europeans believed necessary to further industrial expansion
   c) But the direct economic benefits of imperialism have been much debated, as has the related issue of whether the subject peoples were simply exploited or also benefited (recalling the debates about the what industrialization did for the mass inside Europe)

C. The Marxist explanation (one variety, really, of the economic explanation)
1. Imperialism was the outgrowth of the final stages of capitalism

D. The European state system (“too dynamic” and imperial expansion proved a way to divert some of its energies and possible conflicts)
1. Subcategory: imperialism was a natural product of the endlessly expansionist, peculiarly predatory, racist character of European civilization
   a) As we have seen, there is much plausibility to such views, but they are easily overstated
      (1) Many other cultures, perhaps most, have “racial” elements to them (Japanese, Chinese, Indian among the most obvious), though not exactly “scientific” racism as the Europeans developed it
      (2) Polynesian nobility was considered a different “race,” one who could not be touched, and it forbidden even for the shadow of the lower orders to fall on nobility
   b) Throughout history other civilizations have been expansionist
   c) What was most different about Europeans, finally,
was the power they enjoyed to implement their views—and how their expansion continued all over the globe

d) Whether they were any more brutal than other conquering civilizations is certainly up to question

(1) The way that subject peoples were treated elsewhere hardly speaks for greater humanity—the clearest issue is that of power

V. Varieties of imperialism

A. As with the many other isms we have been looking at, imperialism had many varieties—easily the subject of an entire course itself

B. Indeed, the varieties of imperialism were so great as to make the word quite deceptive

1. To assume that one kind as “typical” can lead to quite mistaken impressions of the phenomenon as a whole

C. As noted, imperialism in the most general way meant the effort not only to establish trade with non-European areas but to dominate them politically—move in armies, administrators, etc.

1. However, “economic imperialism” (without a clear political or military presence) is a term that becomes more and more widely used

D. But the patterns in this regard differed markedly, depending on which part of the world one is speaking about

1. The Americas

a) Here is where the bulk of actual economic investment went but little actual political domination (an awkward fact for those who want to argue that exploiting Africa or Asia was the basis for Europe’s industrial expansion)

2. “Africa” refers to a continent but not much else in terms of political, cultural, linguistic, or religious unity — or colonial experience

a) North Africa was in many regards part of European civilization, and was quite different from South (indeed Egypt was quite different from Morocco)

(1) Taking over Egypt, an area that had long been administered since ancient time by various empires, was not all that different from
taking over a province in Europe

b) In the South there were large European settlements since the 17th century, and significant conflict between them—the Boer War—quite aside from the conflict with "native" Africans (some of whom were also recent arrivals in the area)

c) Equatorial Africa was, again, different, more diverse tribes, far smaller European population or influence, especially once one got away from the coastal areas (this of course was where much of the slave trade concentrated)

d) (some overall comment about it, the race to dominate it at the end of the century)

E. Asia, again, had profoundly different imperial experiences

1. China had long dominated or profoundly influenced East Asia, especially in a cultural sense

2. India was a story in itself (and British settlement and direct administration dated back much before the late 19th century)

3. And Japan’s story, too, is unique— the most successful of any non-European area in responding to the challenge from the West

   a) Although it took several humiliating experiences to bring forth this reaction

4. Other areas, such as Philippines had yet again a special history (and in this sense the United States gets heavily involved in world imperialism, by defeating Spain, etc.)

VI. Imperialism: its significance and long-term meaning for western civilization

A. European civilization spread to much of the world during these years

   1. And that process has of course continued throughout the 20th century, even after many of the imperialists left

B. Many fundamental and very difficult questions have arisen over that confrontation of West and "East"

C. It was traumatic for many of those whom the Europeans ruled over

   1. Whether it was in some larger or more fundamental
sense entirely bad for them, or mixed in its value, is something that has been endlessly debated

D. In some regards, the debate resembles that surrounding industrialization in Europe itself:
   1. Did the lower orders benefit, or were they only exploited?
      a) And, as I said, the debate has moved from the purely economic (most agree that the lower orders benefited economically) to the cultural (the lower orders suffered a great loss in non-quantitative aspects of their life, etc.)
   2. Many Europeans who were not strictly speaking racists saw it as a necessary bringing of “civilization” to those who had none
      a) “Civilization” could mean many things, from an alphabet to medicines to certain moral values to liberal individualism
      b) And there is little question that many non-Europeans wanted at least some of what the West had to offer—and still do—even if repelled by other aspects of westernization

E. These confrontations of cultures raised problems with which we are still struggling, having to do with cultural relativism
   1. The British put an end, for example, to the practice in India of a widow being burned alive on her husband’s funeral pyre (suttee)
   2. And to bring the matter to its most recent manifestation: Do Africans have the right, since it is part of their culture, to cut out the sensitive parts of a young girl’s genitalia (clitoridectomy)—to prevent her from feeling sexual pleasure and thus keep her “pure,” not tempted by sexuality?
      a) Or, is that a violation of her human rights?
      b) And are there indeed discernible human rights, ones that we have some hope to agree on?
      c) The answer to those questions is by no means obvious