

OLLI Lecture #6

“Britain is no longer a European Power”

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The last time we were together I spoke of the “Dissolving Certainties” in European art and culture toward the end of the Victorian period: the rise of Impressionism, the introduction of irrationalism in philosophy, the disturbing new understandings in physics that brought into question some of the fundamentals of our knowledge of the universe as it had been outlined by Sir Isaac Newton in the late seventeenth century.

But uncertainty certainly was not a characteristic of the British government in the middle years of Victoria’s reign. Take for example:

- The “Don Pacifico” Affair (1847) – A Portuguese diplomat serving as consul in Athens had his home attacked by an anti-Semitic mob. David Pacifico had been born in Gibraltar and, although he served in the Portuguese foreign service, he could and did claim to be a British subject. When the Greek government refused to honor “Don Pacifico’s” suit for damages, Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary, ordered the Royal Navy to blockade Piraeus [Athen’s port], forcing the Greek regime to accept Pacifico’s claims. When explaining this event in parliament, Palmerston used the Latin “*Civis Romanus sum*,” equating that ancient claim to the universal protection offered by the British crown to any of its subjects.
- The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) – It should have come as no surprise that the Chinese people, the people of “the Middle Kingdom,” should have resented the sudden presence of foreign “barbarians” in their midst. The British ambassador to the court at Beijing refused to “kowtow” to the Manchu emperor. The British had seized Hong Kong; and after the first Opium War the Chinese were obliged to sign the humiliating treaty of Nanjing (1842) which: opened up British consulates in five Chinese port

cities; ceded Hong Kong to Great Britain; and imposed a harsh indemnity of the Manchu empire.

Popular resistance to these “unequal” treaties (and other local causes) produced in 1850 to a popular uprising against the Manchus led by Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864). This extraordinary rebel claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ and attracted thousands to his cause. This civil war in China continued for more than a decade and took the lives of **millions** of Chinese. In the end, the rebels were defeated by European-trained forces commanded by General Charles Gordon [“China Gordon”] (1833-1885) from whom we will hear more later. As one imperial officer told the Emperor: *“Not one of the 100,000 rebels in Nanjing [Hong’s capital] surrendered themselves when the city was taken, but in many cases gathered together and burned themselves and passed away without repentance. Such a formidable band of rebels has been rarely known from ancient times to the present.”*

China’s misfortunes continued. In 1856 when imperial authorities seized a ship under British registry (the *Arrow*) Palmerston’s government retaliated by bombarding Canton and in June 1858 and marched troops toward Beijing itself, setting fire to the Emperor’s Summer Palace. The Manchus sued for peace and were obliged to sign another humiliating agreement, the Treaty of Tianjin (1858) that: opened a British embassy in Beijing; protected Christian missionaries; allowed Europeans to travel anywhere in China; added six new treaty ports; and stated “Opium will henceforth pay 30 taels per [130 pounds] import duty. The importer will sell it only at the port. It will be carried into the interior by Chinese only, and only as Chinese property; the foreign trader will not be allowed to accompany it.”

It’s odd: General Gordon was commanding Chinese troops in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion just as James Bruce (1811-1863) the 8th Earl of Elgin,

was the British negotiator in the signing of the Tianjin Treaty. Elgin had already served as Governor of Jamaica; then as Governor General of Canada (still a British dominion); and then went on to be Viceroy of India. It was his grandfather, the fourth Lord Elgin, who came close to bankruptcy by buying the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon in Athens; still on display at the British Museum.

Notice that these events in China coincided with the Sepoy Rebellion in India, but soon there were other overseas events that captured British attentions. The Egyptian khedive, Ismail “the Magnificent” (1830-1895), had benefitted enormously from the construction of the Suez Canal, but also the decision of the American southern Confederacy to withhold its cotton from the international market. The British found that Egyptian cotton was just as fine; therefore Egyptian annual exports of cotton rose from 60 million pounds in 1860 to 250 million by 1865. Khedive Ismail may have been caught up in this bonanza; built a huge new palace in Cairo; and even commissioned Verdi’s opera, *Aida*, to be performed there for the first time. His successor, Muhammed Tewfik (1852-1892), was even less constrained financially. He was in time forced to sell off Egypt’s shares in the Suez Canal Company and without parliamentary approval they were purchased by the British government under Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. When nationalist Egyptians protested this takeover in the streets of Alexandria, the British fleet was ordered to bombard the city (1882) and thereafter (until 1946) Egypt and its extension into the Sudan became “protectorates” of the British Empire. The French were not pleased.

Victoria was pleased, however. Her prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, convinced parliament to allow her to accept the title “Empress.” That really wasn’t unprecedented since her contemporary, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, had himself proclaimed Napoleon III by popular acclaim (plebiscite) in 1854. He, too, had great imperial ambitions. The French were already involved in

imperial adventures in Algeria, elsewhere on the African coasts, and even in far away Indo-China where after the Treaty of Tianjin they had established French trading centers in Saigon and Hanoi.

While these events were unfolding, Victoria was served by two great prime ministers: one she admired, Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) [PM 1868, 1874-1880] and one she really couldn't abide—William Gladstone (1809-1898) [PM 1868-1874, 1880-1885, 1886, 1892-1894], who would present his credentials as prime minister to her on four different occasions. The two prime ministers were temperamental opposites: Disraeli, always attuned to the royal moods; Gladstone who on one occasion she complained, "He always addresses me as if I were a public meeting." She called him "a half mad man." The two also had sharply divergent views on domestic policy and even more dramatic divisions on foreign policy. Disraeli was an unapologetic imperialist. It was he who commented, "Britain is no longer a European power" (meaning its interests had become global) and Gladstone who much preferred concentrating government policy on expanding the burgeoning democracy at home and coming to grips with the demands of the British working class and the Irish.

How this divergence of opinion on foreign policy played out began with an uprising of peasants in Herzegovina who were protesting Turkish taxes on their sheep. The brutal Turkish repression of this protest caused the King of Montenegro and the Serbs brashly to declare war on the Ottoman Empire. Fighting then became general throughout much of the Balkan Peninsula and in 1876 the Russians came to the aid of their Slavic brethren by launching yet another Russo-Turkish War. This time the Russians were far more successful than in the past and marched almost to the gates of Constantinople. The Turks sued for peace and signed the Treaty of San Stefano (1877) which extended Russian power to the Black Sea, gave independence to Serbia and Romania, and autonomy to Bulgaria.

British public opinion, now expressing itself more than ever in the popular press, was outraged at this humiliation of its long-standing ally, the Ottoman Empire. A popular song of the day rang out:

We don't want to fight, but, by Jingo if we do, We've got the ships, we've got the men, and we've got the money too. We've fought the Bear before, and while Britons will be true, The Russians shall not have Constantinople.

From this song the term “jingoism” was born.

There was to be no repeat of the Crimean War. A peace conference summoned at Berlin in 1878 revised the Treaty of San Stefano by: recognizing the independence of Serbia, Romania, and even Montenegro; but dividing up Bulgaria into spheres of influence, and allowing the Austrians the right to “administer” Bosnia. For their diplomatic efforts, the British were awarded control of the island of Cyprus (just north of Suez) and the French were afforded the right to extend their holdings in North Africa to include Tunisia. Everybody got something except the Germans who had convened the conference in the first place. The Reich’s Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), stated that he had served simply as “an honest broker.” This conference did not resolve what was then called “the Eastern Question” (what to do with the dissolving Ottoman Empire?) and this irresolution would ultimately lead to World War One.

Who was this guy anyway? Otto von Bismarck was by birth a Prussian *junker*, one of those eastern German landlords who formed the backbone of the Prussian state and had cooperated with the Hohenzollern dynasty to save the Prussia after it had been obliterated by the first Napoleon in 1806. The *junker* class had been instrumental in reconstituting the Prussian army, revolutionizing the state’s public education system, and fostering economic development through industrialization and the creation of the *Zollverein*, a tariff union between north German states. As I mentioned earlier, the Hohenzollerns had during the revolutions of 1848 been forced to grant a constitution to their subjects, but the parliament it created had no right to name the prime minister. In 1862 the Prussian king, Wilhelm I (1861-1888) appointed an experienced diplomat, Bismarck, to the post. He promptly set about expanding and modernizing the Prussian army over the objections of parliament, raising taxes without their consent. The instrument he and the General Staff created soon proved its worth when:

- In 1864 it joined the Austrian Empire in defeating Denmark in a nine-month war over the ownership of the provinces of Schleswig-Holstein.
- In 1866 Prussia defeated Austria itself in a seven-week war (June 14-August 22), thereby creating something called the North German Confederation including all but such south German (and Catholic states) as Bavaria and specifically excluding Austria.
- 1870-71 – Bismarck tricked the Emperor Napoleon III into a war against the Confederation whose outcome was the utter defeat of France, the capture and abdication of the French emperor, the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany, a heavy indemnity, and the installation of Prussia's King Wilhelm I as the Kaiser of a newly-united Germany. His coronation took place at the Palace of Versailles in 1871. The second German "Reich" had been created and, as Bismarck himself put it, "not by parliamentary debate, but by blood and iron."

Where was Britain in all this realignment of powers on the Continent? British fleets and British soldiers had not even been involved in the creation of the Italian nation-state in the period, 1859-1871. That had been primarily the work of the Italians themselves with significant assistance from Napoleon III. Where were the Brits? The answer is found in Disraeli's comment, "Britain is no longer a European power." That hadn't always been true. In the modern period Britain's role had usually been that state which maintained the balance of power on the Continent, especially when its rivals threatened to control the Low Countries—the Netherlands. When Spain tried to assert its authority over that corner of Europe in the sixteenth century, Britain had sided with Spain's enemies. Likewise, when the French revolutionaries overran the Netherlands, Britain joined the alliance against them. In the 1830's Great Britain was a signatory of a treaty guaranteeing the independence and neutrality of the newly-created Belgian nation. In short, it had maintained a vital interest in European affairs until the Empire diverted its attention abroad in the latter years of Victoria's reign. Italy was created; Germany was invented; the American Confederacy was defeated; and the Austrian Empire

became Austria-Hungary without so much as a single English shot being fired. Britain's primary interests were elsewhere.

'As for example, southern Africa. British forces had taken over what was then called "the Cape Colony" from the Dutch when that nation [the homeland] had been overrun by the first Napoleon. In subsequent years it was discovered that the resident Dutch, whom the British called "Boers" [a Dutch word for "farmer"] were sitting atop one of the world's great treasuries of gold and diamonds. The Americans had found gold and silver in their newly-acquired California and Colorado territories. That cache was now augmented by the wealth uncovered beneath the ground in southern Africa. The son of an English pastor, Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) came to capture much of that treasure at the Kimberly Mines, and created the De Beers Company in 1880 (which to this day still dominates the world's diamond market). Rhodes employed his wealth to become prime minister of the Cape Colony in 1890 and used that position to foster British colonization throughout the region, removing African farmers and Boer inhabitants from their land. He wrote once, *"I contend that we [the British] are the first race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race.* He later added: *"If there be a God, I think [what] he would like me to do is paint as much of the map of Africa British red as possible."*

And so he tried. The Boers had attempted to flee British colonialism after 1815 by their "Great Trek" northeast into the Transvaal. The British followed and in due course set off Dutch resistance in what became the Boer War (1898-1901). After several embarrassing defeats, the British army was able to overcome Boer resistance and created the Dominion of South Africa (modeled on the Dominion of Canada) which extended north all the way to another British dominion, named somewhat immodestly "Rhodesia" (now Zimbabwe). Rhodes dreamed of establishing a Cape to Cairo railroad and British domain along the way; however, other international interests intervened as they began carving up the African continent between them.

- The French, for example, used their bases in Algeria and Tunisia to move south into the Sahara and east toward the Red Sea, including a colonial establishment on the island of Madagascar.
- The Portuguese, the first European intruders into Africa, had already established themselves in Angola and later in Mozambique. They now wished to link the two territories by a trans-African railroad.
- The Belgians got into the imperial business in a big way when in 1878 the Anglo-American journalist, Henry Stanley (1841-1904) met with King Leopold II (1835-1909) to create the privately-financed International Congo Association. Stanley's claim to fame was that he was the one who "found" the missionary Dr. David Livingstone (1813-1873) who had been living alone and peacefully with the people on the upper Zambesi River. The Congo Association was a private operation and the main revenue it produced was rubber, a tree-born product whose harvesting soon devastated the Congo Basin's foliage and brutally enslaved its human inhabitants in one of the worst cases of European imperialism.
- The Italians, in their newly-created kingdom, embarked upon their own imperial quest by establishing control in the 1880's over Somalia and Eretria on the shores of the Red Sea. From there they intended to move overland west and conquer the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia and make it part of a new Roman Empire.

As these European expeditions collided with each other, the possibility of an imperial war grew. In order to avert such a crisis and to maintain the stability of the current balance of power, Chancellor Bismarck of Germany convened yet another European conference in Berlin in 1885. Incredibly, they took the map of Africa and drew up mutually-agreeable lines of European control, disregarding tribal, ethnic, or religious divisions among the indigenous peoples. To this day, it is the map of Africa that still confronts us.

Many Africans didn't like this arrangement. Among them was Mohammed Ahmed (1844-1885), a former slave trader, who in 1883 declared himself to be

“the **Mahdi**,” a term which in translation means “one who offers divine guidance in the right way.” That “right way” led him to attack the British administrators in the Sudan and when a relief column from Egypt attempted to reinforce their control of the region 10,000 Egyptian soldiers were slaughtered by the Mahdi’s forces.

At this point, British General Charles Gordon was in Jerusalem and learned that King Leopold of Belgium was offering him the post of Director of the Congo Association, the CEO of that organization’s operations in the Congo Basin. Just as he was about to accept the post, the Gladstone administration in London urged him to go to Khartoum (the capital of the Sudan) to negotiate a peace settlement with the Mahdi. Gordon’s singular appearance in Khartoum touched off a popular rebellion that ended in the general’s assassination at the hands of a Sudanese mob (January 26, 1885). The Mahdi died only six months later. Finally, Prime Minister Gladstone agreed to the dispatch of a punitive intervention by the British army, the extension of the Empire into Sudan, and thus the extension of British rule in Africa. It also brought to an end the third Gladstone ministry (June 1885) with Victoria offering him a seat in the House of Lords as recognition for years of service to the Empire. Gladstone declined.

British dreams of a Cape to Cairo expansion collided in the summer of 1894 with French expansionist designs for an imperial domain that would extend across the Continent from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. Those two imperial aspirations ran against each other when a French cavalry unit under the command of Captain J. B. Marchand came up against British forces at a watering hole in Sudan called Fashoda. The British forces the French encountered there were those of General Horatio Kitchener (1850-1916), who had just captured Khartoum and would thereafter obliterate the Sudanese rebels with Maxim guns at Omdurman (1898), a slaughter witnessed by the young Winston Churchill (1874-1965) who was on hand as a war correspondent.

The crisis at Fashoda and the subsequent Boer War caused the Victorian government, now under Lord Salisbury (PM 1885, 1886-92, 1895-1902), to rethink its “splendid isolation” policy toward the Continent. Salisbury realized that Britain

had no allies in its campaign against the Boers and hardly any allies as it attempted to confront Russian expansionism in the Far East. It was time, even the Tories realized, to reconsider the notion of isolationism, especially as it pertained to a new world power, the United States.

Once merely an extension of British colonialism into North America, the United States in the course of Victoria's reign came to prominence on the world stage as a major power after its civil war had concluded. It had been that power that forced imperial France to withdraw its support of the puppet "emperor", Maximilian I (1864-1867), it had installed in Mexico. After having forced Japan to open its ports to American trade in 1853, the US role as a Pacific power was considerably enhanced in 1869 with the completion of its transcontinental railway, making goods produced in New York available to markets across Asia.

Standing in the way of this enterprise was the Spanish colony in the Philippines. After prayerful consideration President William McKinley (1843-1901) decided to eliminate Spanish power in its last bastions in the Americas (Cuba and Puerto Rico) and therefore first attacked Manila where the US fleet under Commodore Dewey sank the entire Spanish Pacific Fleet in a matter of hours. The British cheered as the American navy sailed out of Hong Kong in 1898 and the great poet Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) later intoned:

Take up the White Man's burden—Send forth the best ye breed—Go bind your sons to exile To serve your captives' need; To wait in heavy harness, On fluttered folk and wild—Your new caught, sullen peoples, half devil and half child.