Why Europe Came for Africa

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Economics, technology, and ideology

The Industrial Revolution and the Hunger for Resources

The Scramble for Africa did not begin in Africa. It began in the factories and counting houses of Europe. The Industrial Revolution, which transformed Britain first and then spread across western Europe from the late eighteenth century onward, created an economic system of insatiable appetite. Factories needed raw materials — cotton, rubber, palm oil, copper, iron ore, coal — in quantities that European territories could not supply. The expanding capitalist system needed new markets in which to sell its products and new territories in which to invest its accumulating capital.

Africa offered all of this in extraordinary abundance. The continent sat atop some of the world's greatest deposits of diamonds, gold, copper, and iron ore. Its forests produced rubber and timber. Its agricultural lands could grow cotton, cocoa, coffee, groundnuts, and palm oil. And its population — still recovering from the demographic devastation of centuries of slave trading — could potentially be put to work extracting all of these resources for European benefit.

The economist John Hobson, writing in 1902, argued that the drive to colonise Africa and Asia was fundamentally an economic phenomenon: European capitalism, having exhausted profitable investment opportunities at home, was driven outward in search of new territories to exploit. Walter Rodney demonstrated in detail how this economic logic operated specifically in Africa, draining the continent's resources to fuel European development while systematically preventing African economic development in return.

The Technological Gap: Quinine, the Maxim Gun, and the Steam Engine

For most of recorded history, Africa had resisted European penetration not because Africans were militarily superior — though in many cases they were excellent fighters — but because of disease. The West African coast was known to European sailors as 'the White Man's Grave.' Malaria, yellow fever, and other tropical diseases killed European

visitors in such numbers that sustained penetration of the African interior was simply not possible.

Three technological developments changed this calculus with devastating suddenness in the second half of the nineteenth century. First, the discovery that quinine — derived from the bark of the South American cinchona tree — was an effective prophylactic against malaria dramatically reduced European mortality in tropical Africa. Second, the development of breech-loading rifles and, above all, the Maxim gun — invented in 1884, the same year the Berlin Conference opened — gave European forces a firepower advantage that was simply insurmountable. The Maxim gun was the world's first fully automatic machine gun, capable of firing 600 rounds per minute; at the Battle of Omdurman in Sudan in 1898, a British force of 8,000 killed approximately 10,000 Mahdist fighters and wounded 13,000 more, while suffering fewer than 50 deaths. Third, the steam-powered riverboat allowed European forces to penetrate deep into the African interior along major river systems — the Congo, the Niger, the Zambezi — that had previously been navigable only by Africans with local knowledge.

> *"The partition of Africa was made possible not by European moral or intellectual superiority, but by European technological superiority in instruments of violence. The Maxim gun did what centuries of missionary persuasion could not: it forced Africans to submit."*
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> **— Basil Davidson, The African Genius**

The Ideology of Colonialism: Racism, Christianity, and 'Civilisation'

Military and economic power alone do not sustain a system of exploitation indefinitely. They must be accompanied by ideology — a set of ideas that explain and justify the exploitation to those who carry it out and, if possible, to those who suffer it. The ideology of European colonialism in Africa was a toxic mixture of scientific racism, Christian missionary zeal, and the 'civilising mission.'

Scientific racism — the attempt to use the methods of natural science to prove the inherent biological superiority of Europeans over Africans — reached its peak influence in the second half of the nineteenth century, presented as scientific fact in European

universities and taught to the educated classes who went on to administer the colonial empire. Christian missionary activity preceded the Scramble and in some ways enabled it: missionaries learned African languages, mapped African territories, and reported back to European audiences with accounts that shaped European popular opinion. The 'civilising mission' — the idea that Europeans had a moral duty to bring civilisation, Christianity, and progress to the 'dark continent' — was the most seductive and most enduring strand of colonial ideology, because it cast naked aggression and theft as benevolent service.

The Pillars of Colonial Ideology
Scientific Racism: pseudo-scientific theories claiming Europeans were biologically superior to Africans, used to justify dehumanisation and exploitation.
The Civilising Mission: the claim that Europeans had a moral duty to bring 'civilisation' and Christianity to Africa, masking commercial and territorial greed as humanitarian service.
Social Darwinism: the misapplication of Darwin's theory of evolution to human societies, arguing that European domination of Africa was the natural result of 'survival of the fittest.'
Terra Nullius: the legal fiction that African land was 'empty' or 'unowned' because Africans had no European-style written land titles, used to justify seizure of land occupied for centuries.
The Dual Mandate: the argument, made most explicitly by Frederick Lugard, that colonial rule served both European economic interests and African development simultaneously.

Against all of this ideology — the racism, the missionary paternalism, the civilising mission — stands the historical record studied earlier in this course: a continent of extraordinary civilisations, great universities, sophisticated governance systems, and rich cultural traditions, systematically destroyed by precisely the people who claimed to be bringing civilisation to it.

Key Takeaways

The Scramble for Africa was driven by three converging forces: the economic hunger of industrialising European capitalism for raw materials, markets, and investment opportunities; the technological revolution in weapons and medicine that made European penetration of the African interior suddenly possible; and a colonial ideology that provided moral justification for what was, in reality, organised robbery. The next lesson examines the Berlin Conference, where the European powers formalised the rules for dividing the continent among themselves.