THE REALITIES IN AFRICA

European Profit or Negro Development?

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In modern times two great world movements have hinged on the relation of Africa to the other continents: the African slave trade, which transferred perhaps ten million laborers from Africa to America and played a major role in the establishment of capitalism in England and Europe based on sugar and cotton; and the partitioning of Africa after the Franco-Prussian War which, with the Berlin Conference of 1884, brought colonial imperialism to flower.

The primary reality of imperialism in Africa today is economic. Since 1884 there has been invested in that continent a sum larger than the total gold reserve of the British Empire and France in 1939. Due to this investment there were exported annually from Africa, just before the present war, seven hundred million dollars' worth of products. And this valuation of African exports is abnormally low, since in a market controlled by the manufacturers the labor cost is depressed so as to yield high profit; the potential value of African raw materials runs into the billions.

These, then, are the two facts to keep in mind in our discussions of the future of Africa — that in the nineteenth century the African trade in men changed to a trade in raw materials; and that thenceforth the political domination which insured monopoly of raw materials to the various contending empires was predicated on the exploitation of African labor inside the continent. The integration of Africa into the world economic organization since the Industrial Revolution has been of far greater significance than social scientists like to admit. A quite natural reticence regarding the immense extent of the slave trade fostered the tendency to treat that question as an incidental moral lapse which was overshadowed and atoned for by the abolitionist crusade of 1800-1860. But an understanding of the economic background of that crusade is basic to the correct interpretation of the twentieth century and its two world wars.

In the eighteenth century England became the great slave-trading nation of the world and made America a land of chattel slavery. But in the nineteenth century England appears as the
emancipator, who stopped the slave trade at great cost, abolished slavery in her own territories and stimulated the reaction against Negro slavery throughout the world. How do these attitudes harmonize? The rise of liberal and philanthropic thought in the latter part of the eighteenth century accounts, of course, for no little of the growth of opposition to slavery and the slave trade; but it accounts for only a part of it. Other and dominant factors were the diminishing returns of the African slave trade itself, the bankruptcy of the West Indian sugar economy through the Haitian revolution, the interference of Napoleon and the competition of Spain. Without this pressure of economic forces, Parliament would not have yielded so easily to the abolition crusade. Moreover, new fields of investment and profit were being opened to Englishmen by the consolidation of the empire in India and by the acquisition of new spheres of influence in China and elsewhere. In Africa, British rule was actually strengthened by the anti-slavery crusade, for new territory was annexed and controlled under the aegis of emancipation. It would not be right to question for a moment the sincerity of Sharpe, Wilberforce, Buxton and their followers. But the moral force they represented would have met with greater resistance had it not been working along lines favorable to English investment and colonial profit.

There followed a brief but interesting period of readjustment. For a while after the triumph of the abolition movement the idea was fairly widespread in England that Africa was to be allowed its own development so long as trade was free. Sierra Leone, the British Negro settlement, was promised eventual autonomy; and when Napier overthrew Theodore of Ethiopia in 1868, he withdrew without even attempting permanent control or annexation. But soon the investing countries realized that strong political control in African and Asiatic colonies would result in such a monopoly of labor and raw material as to insure magnificent profits. The slave trade and slavery would not only be unnecessary; they were actually a handicap to profitable investment.

The process of strengthening control over the people of Africa was therefore developed in the name of stopping the slave trade and abolishing slavery. For a while, English philanthropy and English imperialism seemed to have found one of those pre-established harmonies in economic life upon which Bentham and the Physiocrats had loved to expatiate. Increased trade and
stable government in Africa was going to be the best way of civilizing the natives and lifting them toward self-government. Philanthropy, guided by men like Livingstone, envisaged the raising of the status of black labor in Africa as not only compatible with industrial profit, but practically synonymous with it. It was equally clear that unless there was political domination of these colonies to insure a virtual monopoly of material and labor, the colonial investment there would not be secure. The almost complete partition of Africa followed, settling in the hands of England a vast colonial empire and yielding to France and to Germany less valuable but nevertheless large imperial domains.

A technique of domination was gradually developed. Physical force backed by superior firearms was used in the Sudan. In South Africa, economic pressure was applied by land monopoly, supplemented by a head tax which meant compulsory labor. A caste system of Negroes subordinated to whites was widely instituted, but to some extent modified by cultural segregation, sometimes called "Indirect Rule," by which the cultural integrity of African tribes was within limits permitted for local government, but their economic activities guided by the interests of investment in the hands of the governing country. Just as European peasants did not get a cent of compensation for the three and a half million acres of common land taken from them between 1801 and 1831, so in the Union of South Africa the natives who formed eighty percent of the population came to possess only eight percent of the land. In Kenya 3,000,000 natives are confined today to 50,000 square miles of the poorest land; the best land has been given to Europeans, often at a nominal price, in estates so large that they can only be cultivated by hired labor. Again and again forced labor has been legalized in Kenya; and it is legal today. Labor in the mines of South Africa was long removed only a step from serfdom, and labor conditions there now allow a native wage of $15 a month. In the Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa there has been a sordid history of cruelty, extermination and exploitation.

We must not blink the fact that in the past it has been profitable to a mother country to possess colonies. One sometimes hears that colonies represent a sort of philanthropic enterprise. The colonial system is commended for whatever education and social services it has given to the natives and is not blamed if these social services have been miserably inadequate as compared to the need.
The fact is that so far as government investment is concerned, the money which Great Britain, France, Portugal and Germany as governments have invested in Africa has yielded small returns in taxes and revenues. But this governmental investment and its concomitant political control have been the basis upon which private investors have built their private empires, being thus furnished free capital by home taxation; and while the mass of people in the mother country have been taxed and often heavily for this governmental gift abroad, the private capitalist who has invested in the colonies has reaped not only interest from his own investment but returns from investments which he did not make and which are protected by armies and navies which he only partially supported. Immense sums have been derived from raw material and labor whose price has been depressed to a minimum while the resulting goods processed in the mother country are sold at monopoly prices. The profits have not been evenly distributed at home; but the net return to the white races for their investment in colored labor and raw material in Africa has been immense. That, very briefly, is the fundamental fact of the situation which confronts us in Africa today.

II

For convenience we refer to "Africa" in a word. But we should remember that there is no one "Africa." There is in the continent of Africa no unity of physical characteristics, of cultural development, of historical experience, or of racial identity.

We may distinguish today at least eleven "Africas." There is North Africa — though Algeria and Libya are in large degree a part of southern Europe. There is French West Africa, a vast and loosely integrated region, in one small part of which an educational and cultural development of the natives is in evidence and where there has been some economic progress. There is Egypt, which is still a political and economic satellite in the British Empire; but from Egypt the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan has been cut off and presents a different economy and faces a different destiny. To the south lies Ethiopia, whose long and tragic history foreshadowed the present war. Turning westward again, we have French Equatorial Africa, an economic echo of the Belgian Congo, the seat in the past of terrible exploitation and in the present of a new arming of blacks for European wars.

Then there is British West Africa. It consists of four colonies
and demonstrates the most advanced possibilities of the Negro race in Africa; even here those possibilities are held in check by the limited application of democratic methods and by carefully organized exploitation. There is the Belgian Congo, whose astonishing history is known to all. There is British East Africa, consisting of Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika, combining an advanced native state, an extreme example of European land-aggression in Kenya, and the former German colony of Tanganyika. There is Portuguese Africa, almost split in two by British territory and dependent mainly upon British economic organization. Finally, there are South Africa and the Rhodesias, where 3,000,000 white people are holding 10,000,000 darker folk in economic serfdom. This is preeminently the land of gold, jewels and metals.

Current world opinion makes little distinction among these groups. Berbers of North Africa are usually classed as "white" peoples; Abyssinians are now and then declared not to be Negroes; but on the whole, all Africans, save recent white European immigrants and their offspring, are classed among the peoples of the earth who are inferior in status and in kind.

This decree of inferiority is not based on scientific study — indeed the careful anthropological and social study of Africa has only just begun. Again we must come back to dollars, pounds, marks and francs. The judgment on Africa was rendered on economic grounds (although, of course, pseudo-scientific dogma were adduced to bolster it). Liberal thought and violent revolution in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shook the foundations of a social hierarchy in Europe based on unchangeable class distinctions. But in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Color Line was drawn as at least a partial substitute for this stratification. Granting that all white men were born free and equal, was it not manifest — ostensibly after Gobineau and Darwin, but in reality after James Watt, Eli Whitney, Warren Hastings and Cecil Rhodes — that Africans and Asiatics were born slaves, serfs or inferiors? The real necessity of this fantastic rationalization was supplied by the demands of modern colonial imperialism. The process of exploitation that culminated in the British, French and German empires before the First World War turned out to be an investment whose vast returns depended on cheap labor, under strict political control, without too much interference from mawkish philanthropy.
Philanthropy has fought stout battles for a liberalization of imperialistic rule in the past. The focus of those battles has usually been the question of education of the peoples of Africa; it was the difference of opinion on this issue which awoke philanthropy from its dream of foreordained harmony between the cohorts of Christianity and business. The painful question inevitably arose: to what degree should native people be allowed an education, in view of the fact that educated men do not make cheap and docile laborers? Sharp disputes took place between missionaries and administrative officials over the missionaries' plans for schools and for the training of skilled artisans, civil servants, and professional men such as physicians. In some cases, at least, the insistence of the missionaries was so great that government was forced to yield.

The cultural possibilities of the African native are undeniable. It is admitted even in South Africa today that the native is not being kept out of skilled labor because he is incapable. And his capacity for political self-rule is shown by the success of the native states of the West Coast, the Bunga of the Transkei and other such experiments. Missionaries, travellers, and now many government agents agree that it would be possible to place centers of education in Africa which would in a few generations train an intelligentsia capable eventually of taking fairly complete charge of the social development of the continent. There are beginnings of such centers today at Fort Hare, South Africa; Achimota and Fourah Bay, West Africa; and Makerere, Uganda.

Cutting across this whole question comes the issue of the use of Negroes in war. The Civil War in the United States was fought with the help of 200,000 black troops with a growing possibility of enlisting a majority of the slaves; and their use made further slavery unthinkable. The First World War was fought with the help of black troops which France brought to Europe to ward off annihilation; the blacks of French West Africa were armed on a large scale and became an effective fighting force in Europe. Europe protested — the English in South Africa as well as the Germans in Europe. If armed natives were going to be used in European disputes, would not native colonial revolt be only a matter of years? Today the Free French are not only using black troops but using them under a black governor of French Equatorial Africa, while Senegalese troops of French West Africa and colored troops of North Africa are used in increasing numbers.
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Unless this question of racial status is frankly and intelligently faced it will become a problem not simply of Africa but of the world. More than the welfare of the blacks is involved. As long as there is in the world a reservoir of cheap labor that can raise necessary raw materials, and as long as arrangements can be made to transport these raw materials to manufacturing countries, this body of cheap labor will compete directly or indirectly with European labor and will be often substituted for European labor. This situation will increase the power of investors and employers over the political organization of the state, leading to agitation and revolt within the state on the part of the laboring classes and to wars between states which are competing for domination over these sources of profit. And if the fiction of inferiority is maintained, there will be added to all this the revolt of the suppressed races themselves, who, because of their low wages, are the basic cause of the whole situation.

The World War of 1914–1918 was caused in part by the German demand for a larger share in the domination over labor and in the exploitation of raw materials in Asia and Africa. An important aspect of the World War of 1939 is the competition for the profit of Asiatic labor and materials — competition in part between European countries, in part between those countries and Japan. Submerged labor is revolting in the East Indies, Burma and India itself. It would be a grave mistake to think that Africans are not asking the same questions that Asiatics are: “Is it a white man’s war?”

The social development of Africa for the welfare of the Africans, with educated Africans in charge of the program, would certainly interfere with the private profits of foreign investment and would ultimately change the entire relationship of Africa to the modern world. Is the development of Africa for the welfare of Africans the aim? Or is the aim a world dominated by Anglo-Saxons, or at least by the stock of white Europe? If the aim is to keep Africa in subjection just as long as possible, will this not plant the seeds of future hatreds and more war?

III

One would think that Africa, so important in world trade and world industrial organization and containing at least 125,000,000 people, would be carefully considered today in any plan for post-war reconstruction. This does not seem to be the case. When we
examine the plans which have been published we find either no mention of Africa or only vague references. In President Roosevelt's "four freedoms" speech in January 1941, he did not seem to be thinking of Africa when he mentioned freedom of speech, freedom from want and freedom from fear. When Pope Pius XII spoke in June 1941 on "Peace and the Changing Social Order" his only phrase which could have referred to Africa was "the more favorable distribution of men on the earth's surface." The British Christian leaders in May 1941 made ten proposals for a lasting peace. The tenth reference was to the resources of the earth which "should be used as God's gifts to the whole human race." The American Friends Service in June 1941 similarly asked that all nations be assured "equitable access to markets." That refers to Africa — but it is an ominous reference. The eight points of the Atlantic Charter were so obviously aimed at European and North American conditions that Winston Churchill frankly affirmed this to be the case, although he was afterward contradicted by President Roosevelt. The proposals which have been made by publicists like Clarence Streit and Henry Luce imply a domination of the world by English-speaking peoples, with only passing consideration of black folk. Only in the recent report on "The Atlantic Charter and Africa from an American Standpoint," by the Committee on Africa, the War, and Peace Aims is a more realistic attitude toward Africa manifest. The Committee insists "That Africa today should be the subject of intelligent study in this country for many reasons, but especially because it is the ancestral home of one-tenth of our population, and that it is a continent of vast possibilities and difficult problems, and of vital concern to the United Nations in the present war . . . that Africa still represents the largest undeveloped area in the world, with mineral deposits, agricultural land, waterpower, forest and wild life, resources of importance, all of which are decreasing in value because of careless or reckless use or exploitation; and that these resources need development for its own defense and welfare."

The largest undeveloped area in the world! Is that phrase, spoken frankly by a body particularly conscious of African problems, the clue to the reticence of the other postwar statements on the subject of Africa? I do not mean to be unduly pessimistic; but realism demands that we face the fact that after this war the United Nations will be almost irresistibly tempted to consider
Africa from an industrial and commercial point of view as a means of helping pay war costs and reestablishing prosperity.

If the treatment of Africa in postwar planning begins or ends here the results will be tragic. One can see in all these postwar plans — although often, I know, the implication is not intentional or even suspected — the persistence of the old pattern of thought: the white man’s need of African labor and raw materials and the assumption that these must be cheap in order to yield maximum profits. Above all, and most tragically, appears the assumption that the only problem so far as Africa is concerned is that the various dominating nations of the world must henceforth be treated equitably in sharing the material and the labor.

The memorable phrase of the First World War, the German demand for “a place in the sun,” meant that Germany demanded metals, vegetable oils, fibres and foods from Africa on equal terms with England, either by pooling or preferably by dividing up Africa’s land, labor and resources afresh. To return to such a plan after a generation of indecision, after another ghastly war, and in a period bursting with the components of still another and vaster war, would be blindness indeed. Yet this is precisely what many have in mind. If the rivalry of dominant European nations for colonial profit can be composed by a more equitable distribution of raw materials and labor, they say, then peace will be assured in the world. When they say nothing about the aspirations of the peoples of Africa themselves, what they are actually saying is that peace will be assured if we will all merely return to the eighteenth century.

iv

The first National Congress of British West Africa met in Accra, capital of the Gold Coast Colony, in mid-March, 1920. The Congress, composed of delegates from Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and Gambia, drafted a memorial to His Majesty the King which is a worthy and remarkable document:

In presenting the case for the franchise for the different colonies composing British West Africa, namely, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Nigeria, it is important to remember that each of these colonies is at present governed under the Crown Colony System. By that is meant that the power of selecting members for the legislative councils is in the Governor of each colony and not dependable upon the will of the people through an elective system. In the demand for the franchise by the people of British West Africa, it is not to be supposed that they are asking to be allowed to copy a foreign in-
stitution. On the contrary, it is important to notice that the principle of electing representatives to local councils and bodies is inherent in all the systems of British West Africa. According to African institutions every member of a community belongs to a given family with its duly accredited head, who represents that family in the village council, naturally composed of the heads of the several families. Similarly in a district council the different representatives of each village or town would be appointed by the different villages and towns, and so with the Provincial Council until, by the same process, we arrive at the Supreme Council, namely, the State Council, presided over by the Paramount Chief.

The Congress presses for the appointment of duly qualified and experienced legal men to judicial appointments in British West Africa no matter how high the emolument might be. It also presses for the appointment of African barristers of experience, many of whom as jurists and legislative councillors are found along the West Coast, to appointments on the judicial bench as well as other judicial appointments. The Congress contends that there are African legal men of experience capable of holding any judicial office in British West Africa. It may be mentioned that in Sierra Leone years ago the late Hon. Sir Samuel Lewis, Knight, C.M.G., an African, held the appointment of Acting Chief Justice; the late Mr. J. Renner Maxwell of Oxford University, an African, held the office of Chief Magistrate of the Gambia, which was equivalent then to the office of Chief Justice; that His Honour the late Mr. Justice Francis Smith, an African, was the Senior Puisne Judge of the Gold Coast, and on several occasions held the appointment of Acting Chief Justice; that the late Mr. James A. McCarthy, an African, was for many years the Queen's Advocate of Sierra Leone, which was then equivalent to the post of Attorney General, and on many occasions acted as Chief Justice of that Colony. Subsequently he became the Solicitor General of the Gold Coast, and acted as Puisne Judge on several occasions in that Colony. Further, the late Sir Conrad Reeves, an African, was Chief Justice of Jamaica for many years. Therefore it is no new thing to suggest that worthy Africans should be admitted to the highest judicial offices in the judicial service of British West Africa. It is worthy of note that so renowned is the forensic ability of the African legal practitioner, generally a barrister of one of the Inns of Court in London, that they usually control all the practice in British West Africa and the percentage of European practitioners is hardly three.

It must be remembered that this clear and concise demand for elementary democratic rights among the black people of British West Africa was drafted by native-born Africans of Negro descent. In response to it an elective element was admitted to the governors' councils in four colonies. The governor retained the selection of a majority of the council. Any legislation which he wished was guaranteed passage. In these same councils, in all the colonies, sat men representing business and industry directly, that is, voting in the name of and for foreign investors. They still do.
It should be noted also that many of the preferments listed by the Congress came in that period when, under the triumph of philanthropy, England was hesitating between a policy of slavery and colonial autonomy. Soon, as we have seen, the die was cast.

Beside this document, now, place a statement made in 1923 by the white settlers of Kenya. It is the voice of triumphant commercialism, formulating a racial philosophy for the modern world:

It has been shown that the Black Race possesses initiative but lacks constructive powers, characteristics which justify Lugard’s judgment that for the native African “the era of complete independence is not yet visible on the horizon of time.” The controlling powers may, therefore, aim at advancing the black race as far along the road of progress as its capacity allows, without misgivings that the success of their endeavours will lead to a demand for their withdrawal, entailing loss of prestige and trade. The development of British territories in Africa opens up a vista of commercial expansion so endless that calculated description is difficult. The bare facts are that the area of these territories is 4,000,000 square miles, as compared with India’s 1,900,000; that India’s overseas trade is about £350,000,000, and British Africa’s (excluding Egypt) is about £292,000,000; that the non-self-governing territories, whose total area is 2,628,498 square miles, already produce an overseas trade of £76,500,000, although their development can hardly be said to have begun; that the average fertility and mineral wealth of their soil are at least equal to those of any other great land mass; that they hold an intelligent fast-breeding native population of about 60 millions, waiting for guidance to engage in the production of the raw materials of industry and foodstuffs; and that white settlement cooperating with the native populations does stimulate production many hundreds of times, and does bring about a demand for manufactured articles out of all proportion to its numerical strength.

Here, then, is the African question: European profit — or Negro development? There is no denying that the training of an African intelligentsia implies most difficult problems — the problem of preserving rather than destroying the native cultural patterns and all the problems that come with inexperienced social leadership. The point is that the decision in these matters must not be left to those interested primarily in financial gain, or to white people alone. If there is to be real Negro development there must be created some organ of international trusteeship and the native intelligence of Africa must be represented on the guiding boards. Can we expect Europe and America to approach this question in a way that promises a solution? We could not expect it under ordinary circumstances; but the circumstances today are not ordinary.

If I were to try to state summarily the objectives of postwar
planning for Africa, looking toward the achievement of the world peace which we all so deeply feel must follow this world war, I would say first that it is necessary to renounce the assumption that there are a few large groups of mankind called races, with hereditary differences shown by color, hair and measurements of the bony skeleton which fix forever their relations to each other and indicate the possibilities of their individual members. There is no proof that persons and groups in Africa are not as capable of useful lives and effective progress as peoples in Europe and America.

I would say, second, that we must repudiate the more or less conscious feeling, widespread among the white peoples of the world, that other folk exist not for themselves, but for their uses to Europe; that white Europe and America have the right to invade the territory of colored peoples, to force them to work and to interfere at will with their cultural patterns, while demanding for whites themselves a preferred status and seriously and arbitrarily restricting the contacts of colored folk with other and higher culture. The most dangerous excuse for this situation is the relation between European capital and colored labor involving high profit, low wages and cheap raw material. It places the strong motive of private profit in the foreground of our inter-racial relations, while the greater objects of cultural understanding and moral uplift are pushed into the background.

I would say, third, that it must be agreed that in Africa the land and the natural resources belong primarily to the native inhabitants. The necessary capital for the development of Africa’s resources should be gradually and increasingly raised from savings of the African natives which a higher wage and a just incidence of taxation would make possible. I would say, fourth, that a systematic effort must be begun to train an educated class among the natives, and that class must be allowed to express its opinions and those opinions be given due weight. And I would say, finally, that political control must be taken away from commercial and business interests owned and conducted in the foreign nations which dominate the continent, and this control be vested provisionally in an international mandates commission.

These, in simplest form, are the proposals for the future which correspond to the present realities in Africa.