Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent

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In *Heart of Darkness,* Marlow says that Africa is no longer the "blank space" on the map that he had once daydreamed over. "It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. . . . It had become a place of darkness."[1] Marlow is right: Africa grew "dark" as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of "savage customs" in the name of civilization. As a product of that ideology, the myth of the Dark Continent developed during the transition from the main British campaign against the slave trade, which culminated in the outlawing of slavery in all British territory in 1833, to the imperialist partitioning of Africa which dominated the final quarter of the nineteenth century.

The transition from the altruism of the antislavery movement to the cynicism of empire building involved a transvaluation of values that might be appropriately described in the genealogical language of Michel Foucault. Edward Said's Foucauldian analysis in *Orientalism,* based on a theory of discourse as strategies of power and subjection, inclusion and exclusion, the voiced and the silenced, suggests the kind of approach I am taking here. For middle- and upper-class Victorians, dominant over a vast working-class majority at home and over increasing millions of "uncivilized" peoples of "inferior" races abroad, power was self-validating. There might be many stages of social evolution and many seemingly bizarre customs and "superstitions" in the world, but there was only one "civilization," one path of "progress," one "true religion." "Anarchy" was

many-tongued; "culture" spoke with one voice. Said writes of "the power of culture by virtue of its elevated or superior position to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict, and validate: in short, the power of culture to be an agent of, and perhaps the main agency for, powerful differentiation within its domain and beyond it too." At home, culture might often seem threatened by anarchy: through Chartism, trade unionism, and socialism, the alternative voices of the working class could at least be heard by anyone who cared to listen. Abroad, the culture of the "conquering race" seemed unchallenged: in imperialist discourse the voices of the dominated are represented almost entirely by their silence, their absence. If Said is right that "the critic is responsible to a degree for articulating those voices dominated, displaced, or silenced" by the authority of a dominant culture, the place to begin is with a critique of that culture. This, according to Foucault, is the function of "genealogy," which seeks to analyze "the various systems of subjection: not the antic-ipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations."[2]

Paradoxically, abolitionism contained the seeds of empire. If we accept the general outline of Eric Williams' thesis in *Capitalism and Slavery* that abolition was not purely altruistic but was as economically conditioned as Britain's later empire building in Africa, the contradiction between the ideologies of antislavery and imperialism seems more apparent than real. Although the idealism that motivated the great abolitionists such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson is unquestionable, Williams argues that Britain could *afford* to legislate against the slave trade only after that trade had helped to provide the surplus capital necessary for industrial "take-off." Britain had lost much of its slave-owning territory as a result of the American Revolution; as the leading industrial power in the world, Britain found in abolition a way to work against the interests of its rivals who were still heavily involved in colonial slavery and a plantation economy.[3]

The British abolitionist program entailed deeper and deeper in-volvement in Africa—the creation of Sierra Leone as a haven for freed slaves was just a start—but British abolitionists before the 1840s were neither jingoists nor deliberate expansionists. Humanitarianism applied to Africa, however, did point insistently toward imperialism.[4] By mid-century, the success of the antislavery movement, the impact of the great Victorian explorers, and the merger of racist and evolutionary doctrines in the social sciences had combined to give the British public a widely shared view of Africa that demanded imperialization on moral, religious,

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and scientific grounds. It is this view that I have called the myth of the Dark Continent; by mythology I mean a form of modern, secularized, "depoliticized speech" (to adopt Roland Barthes' phrase)—discourse which treats its subject as universally accepted, scientifically established, and therefore no longer open to criticism by a political or theoretical opposition. In *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960,* Nancy Stepan writes:

> A fundamental question about the history of racism in the first half of the nineteenth century is why it was that, just as the battle against slavery was being won by abolitionists, the war against racism was being lost. The Negro was legally freed by the Emancipation Act of 1833, but in the British mind he was still mentally, morally and physically a slave.[5]

It is this "fundamental question" which a genealogy of the myth of the Dark Continent can help to answer.