

Hobson on White Parasitism and Its Solutions

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ptx**Benjamin R. Y. Tan**¹ 

Abstract

Since the publication of J. A. Hobson's (1858–1940) *Imperialism: A Study* in 1902, the text has been studied—even celebrated—as a liberal or proto-Marxist critique of modern empires. This reputation stands in some tension with the text itself, which defends various forms of imperial domination. While scholars have addressed this tension, they remain divided over how best to understand Hobson's imperial commitments. Offering a new response to this debate, I argue that a key dimension of *Imperialism* has been overlooked—namely, Hobson's conception of humanity as stratified into a hierarchy of racial “souls.” This deeply committed view of human difference undergirded Hobson's arguments about the moral and practical limits of Western imperial power. This article shows how Hobson articulated imperialism as the “parasitic” rule of whites over the nonwhite world—the solution to which was not the rejection of empire but the reform of white imperial power in accordance with his normative vision of global racial hierarchy. This recovery reveals the redemptive critique at the core of *Imperialism* and enables us to more readily grasp the text as a form of imperial apologetics. The article concludes with the suggestion that Hobson is better understood not as a liberal- or socialist-imperialist but as a proponent of racial capitalism on a global scale.

Keywords

white supremacy, new liberalism, imperialism, empire, racial capitalism

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Introduction

Even before John Atkinson Hobson's death in 1940, his *Imperialism: A Study* (Hobson 1902b) was regarded as a landmark text on empire.¹ For some readers, the text's enduring contribution was its analysis of European imperial expansion as driven by the dynamics of finance capitalism. In 1926, the Columbia political scientist Parker T. Moon (1892–1936) described Hobson's book as "the classic indictment of imperialist doctrines and practices" (Moon 1926, 475n3). Writing in 1935, three years before Hobson would issue a third edition of *Imperialism*, the Harvard historian William L. Langer (1896–1977) declared the text as the "starting point for most later discussions [of imperialism] and which has proved a perennial inspiration for writers of the most diverse schools," including "the so-called Neo-Marxians" Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919).² It was, according to Langer ([1935] 1968, 97), "perhaps the best book yet written on the subject."³

Yet, Hobson's reputation as a leading critic of empire stands in some tension with the text of *Imperialism* itself, which explicitly endorses forms of imperial rule. Recent scholarship has sought to address this discrepancy, recasting Hobson—journalist, new-liberal theorist, and economist—as among the leading "progressive imperialists" of his day (Vitalis 2015, 176). But the field remains divided over the precise nature of his commitments to empire. Scholars disagree, for instance, on whether Hobson's imperial apologetics contradict or undermine his more famous critique of financial imperialism.⁴ Scholars also disagree on whether Hobson is best understood as a liberal imperialist, bent on "civilising" the "lower races," or a socialist imperialist who, like his Fabian contemporaries, prescribed global imperial exploitation by the West for the ailments of modern capitalism.⁵ Complicating matters are the different imperial practices that he defended, including imperial federation with the white settler colonies and an international mandates system.⁶

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1. Unless otherwise stated, references to Hobson refer to J. A. Hobson, not J. M. Hobson.
 2. Langer (1935, 102). His formula of comparing Hobson, Lenin, and Joseph Schumpeter was repeated in postwar scholarship, e.g., Kruger (1955).
 3. Langer's ([1935] 1968) book *Diplomacy of Imperialism* was a reevaluation of Hobson's *Imperialism* and would secure Langer's appointment as the inaugural Archibald Coolidge Professor of History at Harvard in 1936.
 4. For earlier discussions, see Long (1996, 117–18); Cain (2002, especially 165–99, 233–40); Winch (2009, 329–30); Hobson (2011, 9–57).
 5. For the former position, see Etherington (1984, 72–76); Cain (2002); Hobson (2011, 28–34); and especially Long (2005). For the latter position, see Claeys (2010, 260–69 and *passim*). Claeys extends some of the arguments found in Porter (2008, 232ff.).
 6. For Hobson's views on imperial federation, see Bell (2016, 354–62).

If we wish to heed calls to decolonize political theory (e.g., Getachew and Mantena 2021), then specifying the imperialist dimensions of Hobson's now-classic text remains a worthwhile pursuit—not least because of its role in shaping critical debates about imperialism through the twentieth century, including Marxist ones.⁷ Scholars continue to discuss his analysis as a prominent and influential critique of the British empire at its apogee (Bell 2011; Pitts 2019), as well as for its contemporary resonances, including its attentiveness to the psychological dimensions of imperialism (Pitts 2010).

This article contends that Hobson's conception of racial hierarchy is a central but neglected component of his imperial thought. Tracing what he meant by "race" allows us to cut through the disagreements around Hobson's imperial commitments and to grasp a more precise account of what he took to be the problem of modern empires—and, crucially, its solutions. For Hobson, humanity was stratified into a hierarchy of distinct and stable racial "souls," an ontological framework that prescribed the moral and practical limits of Western empire. *Imperialism*, and especially its much longer second half, should be read as attempting to delineate these limits and to demonstrate how Western powers were transgressing them. On his account, the West had recently produced a dangerous state of racial disorder in world politics: the "parasitic" rule of whites over the "so-called lower races." For Hobson, the practical amelioration of imperialism so understood—a project of creating what we might call, following Morefield (2014), "empires without imperialism"—required the reform and retrenchment of global capitalism, at the apex of which remained "white civilisation." Hobson, I suggest, defended a vision of racial capitalism on a global scale.⁸

To present this new reading of *Imperialism*, this article examines Hobson's journalistic writings and lectures during the South African war (1899–1902), in which he began to theorize world politics through the lens of racial difference. Departing from much of Hobson scholarship, I show that his use of terms such as "lower races" can neither be reduced to general stereotypes about white-civilizational superiority prevalent among contemporary British intellectuals nor analogized with the more familiar idiom of "less developed peoples."⁹ "Race" in Hobson's thought was highly specified and drew in part from French evolutionary psychology.

7. For Hobson's influence on, and comparison with, later Marxists, see Wolfe (1997); Brewer (1990). For Hobson's reception as a Marxist thinker, see Cain (2002, 231–33) and my conclusion to this article.

8. For recent discussions of "racial capitalism," a term typically attributed to Robinson (1983), see for instance Levenson and Paret (2022); Ince (2022).

9. We see the latter approach in two major studies of Hobson: Cain (2002, e.g., 98, 157, 160); Long (1996, 117–18); cf. Long (2005). Claeys (2010, 254) observes that "much hinges on what Hobson meant by 'control' of the 'lower races.'" This essay is in part an attempt to offer an answer.

This article suggests that Hobson bears some affinity with more recognizably imperialist contemporaries, such as Jan Smuts (1870–1950) or the men of the Round Table, who similarly defended global racial hierarchy.¹⁰ Yet, he fits uneasily into this array of imperialists, not least because he eagerly denounced the claim that “[t]o the white peoples—or some of them—is vouchsafed the opportunity, and the obligation, to impose good government upon the world” (Hobson 1926, 206). What the following account underscores is how such critiques of white domination subsisted within early-twentieth-century imperialist discourse—and, in Hobson’s case, were used as a stage upon which to legitimate imperial power anew. In view of this, we might more readily read liberal critiques of “imperialism,” including those oft-cited examples such as Hobson’s, as a genre of imperialist apologetics.

I begin by retrieving Hobson’s definition of imperialism as white parasitism and its origins in his reflections on South Africa. I then trace the development of Hobson’s thinking on racial difference to identify what precisely he saw wrong about white parasitism. Finally, I examine Hobson’s attempt in *Imperialism* to move from a diagnostic to a prescriptive mode in his defense of indirect rule as a means to sustain a racialized system of global capitalism.

Imperialism as White Parasitism

Hobson’s name is now closely associated with the idea that the main engine of modern imperial expansion is the financier’s desire to acquire overseas markets and natural resources. *Imperialism*, written during the South African war, primarily indicted financiers for the rapid expansion of European empires in the preceding three decades or what had become widely referred to in Britain as “the new imperialism.” These “parasitic” financiers—who, in Hobson’s antisemitic account, were sometimes cast as Jewish—had hijacked the democratic state, the popular press, and parts of the academy to push for wars of imperial conquest.¹¹ This line of argument extended Hobson’s view, articulated before the war (Cain 2002, ch. 2), that the British economy suffered from a maldistribution of income and wealth. This had led to an oversupply of capital in the hands of City financiers and generated their “search for markets” abroad. As I argue here, the scholarly focus on this critique of capitalist finance—modified by Lenin ([1917] 1964) and discussed by later imperial historians—risks obscuring the normative foundations on which

10. On these figures, see Morefield (2014); Davis, Thakur, and Vale (2020) on the Round Table; Kripp (2022) on Smuts.

11. On Hobson’s antisemitism, see the end of this section. For contemporaneous criticisms of Hobson as antisemitic, see Särkkä (2009, 117–20).

Hobson's argument about imperialism was built. His critique of "financial imperialism"—a term used by his readers, but not in *Imperialism* itself—was undergirded by an account of racial hierarchy in world politics.

This much is clear if we home in on how Hobson defined "imperialism." The term did not refer to a general notion of territorial conquest or the rule of overseas colonies, nor was it synonymous with "empire." Hobson (1902b, 11) was explicit: imperialism denoted the post-1870 expansion of European powers in their "scramble for Africa and Asia." The critical passage here is the Introductory to *Imperialism*. By 1902, the book's chapters had largely been published as a series of articles, and in the Introductory we see Hobson (1902b, 4) attempt to cohere these disparate pieces by supplying an analytical definition of imperialism: it was to be understood as a corruption of settler colonialism, which he imagined to be the settlement of white Europeans in "vacant or sparsely peopled foreign lands" such as Australia or the Americas. Following John Robert Seeley's (1834–1895) *Expansion of England* (Seeley 1883), Hobson (1902b, 6) also conceptualized this as the "natural overflow of nationality." Imperialism, by contrast, was the rule of white Europeans over "reluctant and unassimilable peoples" (4), what he also described as "the exercise of forcible control over lower races" (294). "The new Imperialism is [. . .] chiefly concerned with tropical and sub-tropical countries where large 'lower races' are brought under white control" (143).

By the twentieth century, a sharp distinction had been established in radical discourse between colonies of conquest and those of white settlement, the latter of which were claimed to expand the ambit of British "civilisation" and liberty. Colonies of conquest, to their critics, threatened to refashion Britain into an aristocratic and militaristic, rather than industrial and pacific, society (Cain 2007; Taylor 1991). Hobson echoed this existing practice, but departed from radical discourse with his repeated characterizations of imperialism as the *parasitic* rule of whites over nonwhites. He is perhaps better known for using the term "parasitic" to describe the relation of financiers to the imperial state and economy, this being accepted usage among contemporary British radicals (e.g., Robertson 1900, 134, 166). In the same text, however, he repeatedly used the term parasitic to describe "the white races" in general and their relation to the "lower races."¹²

At the definitional core of Hobson's "imperialism," I suggest, was not finance but the "parasitism" of whites over the racial Other. Hobson first advanced this formulation several years before publishing *Imperialism*.

12. See also the following instances in *Imperialism*: Hobson (1902b, 206 ["parasitic . . . white races"], 236, 242, 252 ["the peril of . . . a self-chosen oligarchy among the nations which . . . might learn to live parasitically upon the lower races"], 295 ["the condition of the white rulers of these lower races is distinctively parasitic"], 296).

In the summer of 1899, he was sent to South Africa as a wartime correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, and it is in his editorials then that we see him first theorize white parasitism. His dispatches from the Cape, republished as *The War in South Africa: Its Causes and Effects* (Hobson 1900a), were written in the style of travel ethnology similar to that of James Bryce (1838–1922), whose *Impressions of South Africa* (Bryce 1898) he had reviewed and admired.¹³ Here, Hobson offered a detailed account of the political economy of South Africa that often underplayed the ongoing hostilities between Boers and British settlers. He depicted South Africa as a mixed industrial-agrarian economy *permanently* structured along the color line, and specifically by the “racial cleavage and oppression” of white on “coloured.” On his view, this cleavage fueled a kind of trans-racial solidarity between Boer and British settlers, collectively termed “white South Africans” (Hobson 1900a, 314, 290).¹⁴ The “two white races, however they might bicker among themselves, readily united to present a single front against the Kaffirs” (281).

The central claim that Hobson advanced here was that parasitism, and specifically a white “parasitic caste,” was forged on the basis of shared dependency on nonwhite labor. “Both [British and Boer] races are agreed in accepting a serf-civilisation . . . they develop of necessity the vices of a parasitic caste” (Hobson 1900a, 314). He also termed this economic formation a “permanent economic aristocracy. . . . The presence of large supplies of available Kaffirs has simply converted the entire white population into a parasitic class living upon black labour by methods which resolve themselves, when properly considered, into ‘force’” (292). This aristocracy, he argued, fueled an ideology of racial inequality, or a “strong deep-rooted general sentiment of inequality [that] cannot be over-ridden by Imperial edict” (291). This “sentiment” was not merely epiphenomenal, as it reinforced “the present absolute social cleavage between blacks and whites. . . . Manual work has become a badge of shame for white men” (293).

This pathologization of white settlers was a common move among metropolitan liberals in Britain, even as they imagined the settler colonies as sites of expansive political possibility (Bell 2007, 2016). Observing the rise of white-nativist labor movements in Australia and elsewhere, Bryce (1902, 34), Charles Dilke (1890, ii, 299–309), and other prominent liberals described white “colonial workmen” as uniquely debased by their fear of, and dependency on, nonwhite labor. Such critiques were often animated by the fear that

13. Hobson (1899b) lauded the book as the “standard authority” on South Africa.

14. For a similar account of Hobson’s *War*, read as an economic analysis of white solidarity, see Jeeves (2002).

white-settler violence threatened imperial unity and the ideals of good government and multiracial subjecthood that were seen as underpinning it. Like his fellow liberals, Hobson (1903, 592, 583) described post-Reconstruction segregation in the United States in terms analogous to his account of South Africa, as sustained by “the dominance of slave-owning sentiments” among whites, or what he called “white supremacy.” The emerging “commercial and professional aristocracy” (594) in the American south, he argued in 1903, was a problem insofar as it undermined “the elements of stability”: America “is broken into two nations” along racial lines (585).¹⁵

What *was* unusual about Hobson’s account of white-settler society in America and South Africa was his attempt to project it onto global politics *writ large*. Upon his return to England from the Cape in 1899, Hobson extended his earlier analysis of South Africa as a framework for understanding the West’s relations to the non-Western or “coloured” world. This relation was similarly articulated in terms of a racial aristocracy: “the white races, discarding labour in its more arduous forms,” he wrote, “live as a sort of world-aristocracy by the exploitation of ‘lower races’” (Hobson 1902b, 206). He likened “white Western nations” to “parasitic and degenerate white masters” ruling over “slave races” (242). The language he used to describe the parasitism of “the white races” in global politics closely tracks his earlier descriptions of white South African settlers.¹⁶ Both groups were cast as a feudal degenerate class, who were tempered by their dependency on cheap labor to believe in the inherent superiority of whites.

This notion of white parasitism is distinct from Hobson’s better-known, antisemitic discussion of a “parasitic” Jewish conspiracy. These two lines of argument ran alongside one another in *The War in South Africa*. Here, he claimed that expansionary war was ultimately the product of “Jewish-Imperialist design” driven by “a small group of international financiers, chiefly German in origin and Jewish in race” (Hobson 1900a, 226, 189)—an argument that also appears briefly in *Imperialism* (Hobson 1902b, 64). This virulent antisemitism reflected, in part, Hobson’s view about the presence of foreign manipulation in British imperial politics. By contrast, his discussion of white parasitism stemmed from a different concern: the morality and well-being of whites under a condition of dependency on “coloured” labor. In South Africa, the white “serf-holder [. . .] suffers, as is natural in these circumstances, a descent into a torpid unprogressive life” (Hobson 1900a, 253). This was, by Hobson’s lights, a more pressing problem: white racial

15. For similar critiques of racial segregation among British liberals, see Rich (1990, 70–82).

16. See n12.

aristocracy could exist in places such as the American south where on his account a Jewish conspiracy was absent.¹⁷ In South Africa, he argued, white parasitism would persist past the war, due to white dependency on indigenous labor that was “the very foundations of white civilisation” there (281). His fears appeared to be confirmed in 1908, as the former Boer military commander Jan Smuts sought to unify the South African colonies on the basis of an exclusive white franchise.¹⁸ In *Imperialism*, Hobson (1902b, 252) indicted the white races in toto for asserting themselves as “a self-chosen oligarchy” that “live[d] parasitically upon the lower races.”

Racial Souls and Civilizational Difference

At first glance, the wrongness of white parasitism seems self-evident. The pejorative force of “parasitism,” indicating aristocratic indolence, would have been clear to Hobson’s radical readership. In this section, I show that a closer examination of his writings before 1902 suggest a more complex story. Just as Hobson was turning to imperial commentary in the late 1890s, he was also fashioning a precise conception of racial difference that would be carried forward into *Imperialism*. This is key to understanding how he rejected white *parasitism* but not other forms of racial domination over the “lower races,” who he also termed “unprogressive peoples” (Hobson 1902b, 237).

The crucial moment came in February 1899, several months before Hobson would travel to South Africa. It was then that he began to discuss world politics as divided into “historic races,” distinguished in part by color, and representing distinct *souls* (Hobson 1899a, 105). The source of this shift was Hobson’s encounter with the popular science writer Gustave Le Bon’s (1841–1931) racial psychology.¹⁹ In reviewing the translated works of Le Bon and others, as an editorial writer for the *Ethical World* and the radical *Speaker*, Hobson most reflexively discussed race as a category of political analysis and moved away from the more general uses of “race” among contemporary intellectuals to refer to a breed, class, or hereditary lineage.²⁰

17. Curiously, in *Imperialism*, Hobson pared back—without rejecting—his earlier antisemitic claims about a Jewish conspiracy, just as he was expanding his analysis of white parasitism to world politics. The reasons for this former shift in 1900–1902 have produced lively debate, still unsettled: see Arendt (1973, 135n34); Mitchell (1965); Allett (1987); Jeeves (2002); Särkkä (2009, 117–20).

18. See Hobson’s letters to Smuts on 16 December 1908, protesting the “disappearance of the Native franchise in the Cape,” in Hancock and van der Poel (1966, 530, cf. 437–38, 530–33).

19. On Le Bon’s racial theory, see Nye (1975, ch. 3).

20. *Ethical World*, a newspaper founded in 1898, was co-edited by Hobson and Stanton Coit in 1899.

Borrowing from Le Bon (1899), whose *Psychology of Peoples* (trans. 1899) he argued “merit[s] our gravest consideration,” Hobson defined racial difference in terms of the “character or ‘soul’ of a race,” which bore “virtually permanent” physiological and mental traits (Hobson 1899a, 105, 1901b, 276). These racial souls were characterized as stable elements in human history, out of which first grew “divergent types of civilization” and, in turn, “national character” (Hobson 1901b, 275f). As he argued in *The Social Problem: Life and Work* (Hobson 1901b, 276), which originated as a lecture series for the Christian Social Union and which also cited Le Bon:

No stress need be laid upon any theory of “natural” races; it suffices that we find deeply marked characters of historic race, physical and psychical, which, whether they be regarded as “original” or entirely as products of their material environment, do tend to express themselves firmly and constantly in widely divergent types of civilisation.

Here, Hobson asserted racial difference as immutable, thus espousing a kind of *racial essentialism*: he asserted the fixity of race “characters” while refusing to specify their origins, including whether or how they might be grounded in biological heredity. This was part of a broader turn in Western international thought toward articulating race through the science of psychology, especially in terms of the irrational or unconscious (Sluga 2006, ch. 3). Asserting the fundamental separateness of races as such enabled some writers, including Le Bon, to critique extra-European imperial expansion as unnatural (Nye 1975, 50f.). While Le Bon’s theory of racial souls also contained a *Herrenvolk* defense of immigration restriction that was readily taken up in America, Hobson drew from it a critique of Britain’s civilizing mission.²¹ If Le Bon is correct, he wrote, races “can never really meet except in the most superficial way.” “In a word, one nation cannot civilize another nation. . . . Those who feel so confident that we are teaching English arts to India should read what M. Le Bon has to say on this theme” (Hobson 1899a, 105).

This account of racially determined civilizations is critical for understanding Hobson’s assertion of imperialism as white parasitism, since it delimited what he saw to be the moral and practical limits of imperial—and especially British—power. Two claims that Hobson developed from his racial essentialism are worth noting, which are examined here in turn: first, his assertion of

21. See, e.g., the invocation of Le Bon by Prescott F. Hall (1921, 607), who helped found the Immigration Restriction League. Hobson (1911b) distanced himself from contemporary anti-immigration movements, partly due to his Cobdenite commitment to global exchange and free movement.

civilizational “variety” as a necessary precondition for human progress and, second, his view of England’s unique role in this progress, as the “workshop of the world.”

While Hobson understood humanity to be a single ethical community, in the sense that it served as the greatest object of the common good, the civilizational differences produced by racial “souls” imposed sharp limitations. It meant, for instance, a predetermined division of labor in global commerce.²² Throughout his writings, he would repeatedly emphasize the link between race and labor capacity (e.g., Hobson 1902b, 197). At the Universal Races Congress in 1911, for instance, where Hobson presented a paper, he is recorded in the discussion as asserting that, in global commerce,

race . . . entered as a qualifying factor, in respect to different capacities of labour. It was represented in a different attitude of mind towards the processes of saving and investment which built up the capitalist structure of industry, and still more in a different attitude towards economic life through methods of consumption. (Executive Council 1911, 42)

In Hobson’s scheme, some civilizations were destined to remain agricultural, while others such as England were to inculcate “modern” industry. There existed, he argued, the civilization of “modern industrial peoples,” such as the English, and those of “the agricultural races in such countries as Burmah, China, or the Transvaal” (Hobson 1900a, 312–13). This civilizational difference, in Hobson’s view, enabled specialized production and, in turn, global commerce. Jews, though occasionally described by Hobson (1900a, 189) as a “race” with particular characteristics, were absent (though not explicitly excluded) from this scheme.²³

Hobson’s racialized vision of world politics was partly derived from Herbert Spencer’s (1820–1903) theory of social evolution, in which progress was marked by the growing “differentiation” of humanity’s constituent parts that in turn enabled more complex forms of social cooperation.²⁴ In *Imperialism*, he argued that civilizational diversity was necessary for the furtherance of “social evolution,” in which violent conflict would be superseded by “higher kinds of competition” in the domain of commerce (Hobson 1902b, 198). Invoking the

22. On Hobson’s Comtean-inflected conception of human nature and human unity, see Claeys (2010, 271–80); Freedon (1990).

23. To my knowledge, Hobson did not indicate whether he considered Jews as part of “the white races.”

24. On Spencer’s evolutionary internationalism, see Bell (2016, 249–54).

widely popular free-trade ideals of Richard Cobden (1804–65), Hobson argued that “the sympathetic motives of commerce and friendly intercourse will maintain permanent peace” (195).

It was on these grounds that Hobson claimed civilizational diversity as critical for humanity’s progress, what he also described as “the advantage of variety of species in the furtherance of the evolution of a complex humanity.”²⁵ As he wrote in *The War in South Africa* (Hobson 1900a, 313):

To say that there exists one goal of civilisation for all the races of the world, one road along which progress lies equally for all, and that the Anglo-Saxon peoples are the possessors of this goal, and therefore the sole judges of the progress of other peoples, is at least a gratuitous assumption.

In *Imperialism*, Hobson would make a similar case against British rule in Asia: the “claim of the West to civilise the East,” he argued, “must rest ultimately upon the [false] assumption that civilisations, however various in their surface growths, are at root one and the same” (Hobson 1902b, 305).

This view of human difference is what scholars often term, misleadingly, as Hobson’s “cultural relativism” (Cain 2002, 66; Claeys 2010, 239; Hobson 2011, 30; Porter 2008, 181–84; Rich 1990, 34–43; Townshend 1990, 109). This interpretation typically hinges on the anthropological writings of Mary Kingsley (1862–1900), which Rich (1990, 23–43; cf. Porter 2008, 282) argues prompted Hobson to take up a neo-polygenetic view of humanity as divided into separate, incommensurable cultures. Kingsley was an anthropologist and prominent advocate for indirect rule in West Africa, which she defended on account of her claim that differences in “culture” meant the impossibility of turning “the African . . . into a Europeanised man” (Kingsley 1899, 377). Her impact is clearly evident in *Imperialism*, which cited her vision of indirect rule as a model for “enlightened policy” in the colonies (Hobson 1902b, 127n2). But Hobson’s own language indicates a greater debt to Le Bon’s writings, from which he took the notion of racial souls and the broader idiom of racial psychology—describing, for example, colonial rule in India as foiled by the “psychical chasm” between white and colored, resulting in the “unintelligibility” of Indian life and the “soul of the people” to English rulers (322). “Culture” was not an explicitly theorized concept in his thought as were race or civilization. It would be more accurate, I suggest, to describe his understanding of human difference as grounded in his account of race.

25. Hobson (1897, 454). This early anonymous essay, signed “Nemo,” is broadly accepted to have been authored by Hobson: Porter (2008, 177); Cain (2002, 64–80); Claeys (2010, 237–40).

Hobson's repeated rejection of schemes for a "world-state" was underpinned by this view of human difference.²⁶ Such proposals were a practical impossibility, he argued in 1901, as there existed "widely divergent types of peoples" that no single government could hope to rule successfully (Hobson 1901a, 52). Good government, enabled by rulers possessing a "close knowledge and sympathy with the personality of the governed class," was precluded by the fact of civilizational diversity (Hobson 1901a, 54; cf. 1902b, 322, 1906, 24f., 1915a). Hobson (1897, 454, 458, 1901b, 278f.) developed this line of argument into an explicit critique of attempts to "graft" English "civilisation" onto other societies, which ignored the incommensurability of racial difference. During the First World War, he would also launch a similar critique of Lionel Curtis (1872–1955) and the Round Table imperialists, who envisioned the British empire as a "commonwealth" that would universalize Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic "freedom": "Is it not a little arrogant," Hobson argued, "to assume so confidently that the British people ought to extend their 'Kultur' into a world-Kultur?" (Hobson 1916, 3).

Hobson also moved against theories of "race struggle" advanced by contemporary sociologists and eugenicists on both sides of the Atlantic. He dedicated long tracts of *Imperialism* to refuting the views of Benjamin Kidd (1858–1916) and Karl Pearson (1857–1936), who saw Western expansion as advancing progress by eliminating weaker and less "efficient" races (Hobson 1902b, pt. 2, ch. 2; cf. Kidd 1898; Pearson 1901). Progress, Hobson (1902b, 196) argued, was attained not through physical struggle and a concomitant reduction of civilizational diversity but by peaceful competition between civilizations in the domains of commerce and "ideas." The expansion of England had sharp limits. As such, Hobson often put his usage of the "lower races" in quotation marks, which sought to distance his views from those of contemporaries who deployed the term under the premise that the "Anglo-Saxon" or "Teutonic" race had a particular genius for government or love of liberty—or "some great cosmic duty" to civilize the non-West (Hobson 1897, 449).

For Hobson, efforts to conquer or civilize other civilizations were an abdication of England's actual destiny. As with any civilization, he argued, that of England grew out of unique and stable racial traits. In *The Social Problem*, Hobson (1901b, 277) argued that the question of how "In what way can England best utilise for the welfare of the world her national energy?" was to be answered "based upon consideration of the physiology and psychology of races." A decade earlier, in *The Evolution of Modern Capitalism: A Study of Machine Production* (Hobson 1894), Hobson's first single-authored

26. For Hobson's views on a world state, see also Claeys (2010, 267–70).

monograph, he had already gestured to what he saw to be England's "racial character" (81): "[m]uscular strength and endurance"; "keen zest of material comfort"; and the "moral capacities of industry, truth, orderly co-operation" (74). These, he argued, were a "powerful directing influence in industry" (74) that had helped England's passage "from primitive savagedom to modern civilisation" (364).

The precise link between England's racial traits and its ability to produce an industrialized "civilisation" remained hazy in Hobson's thought. As we have seen, he readily dismissed questions about the origins of racial difference. Nonetheless, Hobson (1901b, 277) argued in 1901 that England's "racial character" had clear implications for its relation to the world. It faced a choice between what he characterized as "intensive" and "extensive" cultivation—that is, between developing industry at home or seeking to maximize its territory through formal expansion. Given the "racial character" of England, he endorsed the former. Despite Hobson's changing views on other issues, most prominently free trade and finance (Matsunaga 2021), his claim about the "different capacities of labour" of races remained remarkably stable. It predated his emergence as a trenchant critic of "insane" imperialism in the late 1890s, when he turned his attention sharply to the new Conservative-Unionist government's imperial and foreign policy.²⁷

Hobson's criticism of settler colonialism rested on this view of racial difference. Colonies in which industrial work was done by non whites "under white superintendence" was, for Hobson (1902b, 143), an abdication of England's world-historical role as the "workshop of the world," a role bestowed upon it in part by its "racial character."²⁸ White settlers should, on account of their race, engage in industrial labor directly. Where cheap, non-white labor could be employed or indentured, this was impossible. In the case of South Africa, the racial division of labor had given rise to a *refusal* among whites to engage in manual labor and an ideology of inequality to support it. In *Imperialism*, Hobson (1902b, 296) echoed his earlier writings about the physical and moral decay of white settlers in South Africa:

The white farmer [in the colonies]. . . does little work, manual or mental, and tends everywhere to become lazy and "unprogressive"; the trading, professional or official classes of the towns show clear signs of the same laxity and torpor.

Such concerns about the degeneration of white settlers in tropical climates were widespread in *fin de siècle* Europe. But while Hobson cited climate as

27. On this shift, see Cain (2002, ch. 3).

28. Early in his career, Hobson (1891, 4, 8) described England as the "workshop of the world."

one reason for this degeneration, the source of “laxity and torpor” among white settlers was specifically the lack of *work* being done. For Hobson, this amounted to a renunciation of what was distinctively valuable and essential to what he called “white civilisation”—namely, industrial labor.

Race and Unequal Integration

This was the root of white parasitism. Hobson’s notion of England’s unique “racial character,” together with his theory of civilizational diversity, structured his views about how whites—individual settlers and imperial powers alike—ought to interact with the nonwhite world. He rejected projects for a “world-state” and for a civilizing mission, as well as the maintenance of what he characterized as white oligarchies in places such as the Cape or the United States. Hobson’s targets included figures such as Smuts and Curtis, who looked to South Africa as a “microcosm . . . of the Empire itself” (Curtis, quoted in Lavin 1982, 99). As we have seen, Hobson took South Africa to be the exemplification of white parasitism and was sharply critical of these designs. He would later denounce Smuts’s influential proposal for a League of Nations (Smuts 1918), arguing that it “eulogise[d]” British rule in southern Africa and in fact represented a continuation of the new imperialism (Hobson 1919, 4).

Such critiques were targeted and narrow, offering strictures on how white power was to be exercised in world politics. Here, I trace how Hobson’s critique was also a redemptive project. Just as he was articulating an account of global white parasitism, he grasped for ways it could be overcome. One such course of action, he argued, was the reform of indirect rule that he claimed would produce “equitable relations among peoples recognized to be incapable of the same general development” (Hobson 1911b, 7). In making this argument, Hobson aligned himself with a lively humanitarian discourse that was similarly preoccupied with the rehabilitation of imperial power, seen as only corrupted by the recent scramble for Africa. Colonized Africa, reduced in this discourse to a field of missionary activity, capitalist exploit, and “new slaveries,” was rendered a crucial site of this renewal (Grant 2005).

The key, perhaps puzzling, observation to make here is that Hobson’s notion of race, which he used to reject certain forms of imperial domination, also undergirded his commitment to the West’s claim to imperial sovereignty over the non-Western world. He held a longstanding view, dating to the early 1890s, of a teleological account of human development that culminated in industrial capitalism. Given its racial capacities, England was the indispensable agent of this development. Hobson argued that the industrialization of England—or, in a crucial slippage that we see especially in his later writings, that of the “West”—granted it a right and moral imperative to imperialize.

He described this in terms of a *civilizational* imperative, frequently invoking the claim that there existed an objective moral standard of “world-civilisation,” used interchangeably with “Humanity,” which might justify imperial domination and resource extraction (Hobson 1902b, 242, 249–50, 346).²⁹ As he claimed in *Imperialism*, “it is necessary that Western industrial civilization shall undertake the political and commercial management of the whole world” (74). It was this necessity that overrode claims to territorial or political sovereignty among non-Western peoples (Hobson 1902b, 241, 1915b, 139f.). This argument fused a prevailing Comtean language of “Humanity” with a utilitarian argument about the superior value of industrial capitalism (Claeys 2010, 278f.).

This stance, what Claeys (2010, 260–70, 284) characterizes as Hobson’s socialist-utilitarian defense of empire, appears to contradict his strictures against the “parasitic” relations of whites to the “lower races.” Complicating matters is the fact that Hobson appears to use the term “civilisation” in at least two distinct ways: one signifying incommensurable political and “psychical” difference between human societies and another signifying commensurable difference, used to rank societies by their proximity to industrial capitalism. Both uses of civilizational difference were rooted in Hobson’s notion of racial souls.

In view of this, we might be tempted to describe Hobson as an inconsistent or contradictory theorist of empire. Indeed, this is a common move in the literature (e.g., Claeys 2010, 263; Etherington 1984, 81–83; Winch 2009, 329–30). Some commentators have sought to qualify Hobson’s reputation as a leading critic of empire, whose imperial commitments contradict his more famous critique of financial imperialism (e.g., Long 1996, 117f.). Hobson’s imperial thought, his readers argue, was “schizoid” or “paradoxically schizophrenic” (Cain 2002, 9; Hobson 2011, 29).

Despite Hobson’s changing views on other issues, however, there is evidence for *not* reading him as inchoate on the question of white parasitism. What we see in *Imperialism* is an attempt to articulate the means by which Western imperial states might extract themselves from their parasitic relationship with the “colored” world—that is, recognize the limitations of “white civilisation” in a world of “multi-form” civilizations (Hobson 1901b, 276)—while *also* retaining their progressive role as agents for “world-civilisation.” In a crucial passage in the longest chapter of the book, on “Imperialism and the Lower Races,” he declared:

That the white Western nations will abandon a quest on which they have already gone so far is a view which does not deserve consideration. That this process of development may be so conducted as to yield a gain to

29. Hobson (1902b, 245, 248) also used the phrase “the civilisation of the world.”

world-civilisation, instead of some terrible *débâcle* in which revolted slave races may trample down their parasitic and degenerate white masters, should be the supreme aim of far-sighted scientific statecraft. (Hobson 1902b, 242)

Hobson here took the global expansion of “white Western nations” as ongoing and inevitable. In response, he offered an uneasy vision of world politics that committed to both civilizational incommensurability and unequal capitalist integration: Western civilization could not in practice “graft” its institutions onto “the lower races” but had the right to sovereign control over the latter. Hobson’s self-declared aim was to articulate a “far-sighted scientific statecraft” that would guide and reform this inevitable “quest” to avoid the pitfalls of white parasitism, especially the “terrible *débâcle*” of anticolonial revolt. Throughout his career, he would repeatedly caution imperial powers that engaging in “parasitism” would provoke a global race war (e.g., Hobson 1902b, 204–206; cf. 1900b, 1915b, 144).

It would therefore be useful to view Hobson as a theorist of political necessity who sought to guide the ship of (imperial) state through perilous waters. To be sure, Hobson, in his discussions of global order, sometimes adopted a theoretical register that we might describe as utopian or ideal.³⁰ In his prescriptions for the problem of white parasitism, however, we see him adopt a practical register that grasped at the immediate and effective maintenance of imperial power. We might therefore distinguish his prescriptions from the more unrestrained visions of white racial utopia that also circulated in this period, including those of the Round Table (Bell 2020; Morefield 2014). His views had broad affinities with British humanitarian discourse about imperial corruption and were explicitly directed at it: his chapter on “The Lower Races,” including the previous passage, first appeared in the *British Friend*, a Quaker journal that often published antislavery and pacifist writing in the Edwardian period (Hobson 1902a).

What Hobson prescribed in *Imperialism*, to see off white parasitism, was the continued integration of different “civilisations” into a capitalist system of unequal interdependence for the sake of the West’s work of advancing “world-civilisation.” While his vision of world politics comprised “widely divergent types of civilisation” that could not be fused or eliminated through imperial expansion, these types could not, morally speaking, exist in isolation. Such a view was consistent with Hobson’s understanding of humanity as an organic whole, consisting of permanently divided parts that played distinct and interdependent roles (Freedman 1990), and his commitment to the

30. See, for instance, Hobson’s abandoned speculation that humanity’s races could be fused through a eugenic “stirpiculture” (Hobson 1902b, 201–202; cf. 1911b, 4).

pacifying force of free trade. As he declared in his paper for the Universal Races Congress, “it is so desirable that peaceful and profitable trade relations should grow up between European nations and coloured or backward ones”; this required the West’s “peaceful penetration by appeal to the mutual interests which trade generates” (Hobson 1911a, 229f.). In the interwar period, Hobson (1920) would term this his theory of “economic internationalism,” or what Winch (2009, 329–30) calls his “cosmopolitan capitalism.” Earlier, in *Imperialism*, Hobson (1902b, 295) had argued that the West’s “peaceful penetration” ought to engineer “a wholesome balance of mutual services” in “the relations between white and coloured people.”

Much hinges on what he meant by “peaceful penetration.” In *Imperialism*, we see Hobson sketch out various answers. In one instance, he reached for international mandatory rule over the “lower races,” so long as it advanced “the civilisation of the world” and was administered by “some organised representation of civilised humanity” (Hobson 1902b, 245). But this incipient proposal for an imperial League of Nations was left undeveloped in *Imperialism*, only to be fleshed out in *Towards International Government* (Hobson 1915b).

In 1902, Hobson remained preoccupied with theorizing indirect rule—detached from any international government—which he argued would mold out of the “lower races” a new capitalist subject, willing and able to participate in the exchange of resources, goods, and labor with the industrialized West. This was a pedagogical project. As he argued at the Universal Races Congress, such imperial trusts should consist of officials “whose main efforts should be directed to the slow and steady work of educating the people in the arts of industry and the growth of wholesome wants” (Hobson 1911a, 231). In *Imperialism* (Hobson 1902b, 293), he envisioned a form of indirect rule that aimed at what he called “organic” transformation: the “decay” of old societies and the natural “growth” of new, commercial forms of life in societies where they did not yet exist.

So far as Imperialism seeks to justify itself by sane civilisation of lower races, it will endeavour to raise their industrial and moral status on their own lands, preserving as far as possible the continuity of the old tribal life and institutions . . . under the gradual teaching of industrial arts and the general educational influences of a white protectorate many of the old political, social, and religious institutions decay, [and] that decay will be a natural wholesome process, and will be attended by the growth of new forms, not forced upon them, but growing out of the old forms and conforming to laws of natural growth. (Hobson 1902b, 293)

Hobson (1902b, 241, 293) equivocated on what it would require for indirect rule to “raise” the “industrial and moral status” of the lower races, at times

prescribing a “measure of compulsory education” while at others suggesting that imperial powers merely “communicate” the arts of industry. In the second edition of *Imperialism*, revised and published in 1905, Hobson (1905, 277–78) suggested the use of monetary incentives, or “remunerative employment,” as a “legitimate and wholesome means of developing a country.”

Despite such ambivalences, Hobson presented a theory of imperial development. He conceived of indirect rule as part of a developmental project of capitalist integration, rather than as an epiphenomenal construct, serving to protect the “traditional” society of irredeemably “backwards” colonized subjects against modernity. The latter view of indirect rule was a powerful line of imperial apologetics, articulated by Henry Maine (1822–88) and reasserted in the twentieth century by Frederick Lugard (1858–1945) and other imperial administrators (Mantena 2010). Hobson’s own argument echoed those of British humanitarian activists, who sometimes defended indirect rule as a means to emancipate and transform the colonized native into what John Holt (1841–1915), a Liverpool merchant and advocate of indirect rule, described as “a free agent to dispose of his produce to whoever he chooses” (quoted in Porter 2008, 257). Crucially, imperial rule would do so, so Hobson and Holt asserted, without violence. Despite his developmentalist posture, Hobson, like Maine before him, let imperial power off the hook: its authority could be legitimated without replicating the political and legal institutions of the metropole and without offering a pretense of “preparing” colonized subjects for self-rule.

Given this defense of imperial power, we might think that there is less daylight between Hobson and his declared adversaries than he would have us think. Like the imperialists of the Round Table, he accepted the “management” of the globe by “white Western nations.” Despite rejecting their designs for an imperial “world-state” and their adulation of South African white supremacy, Hobson held a similarly anxious desire to see off anticolonial revolt and, like Smuts, saw mandates as one potential way to do so. Most importantly, he shared with them a thoroughly racialized ontology of world politics in which the assertion of essential racial difference did much of the work to vindicate Western claims to imperial sovereignty.

But we might also think that Hobson represents an alternative strand of imperial apologetics. If Smuts and the Round Table figures offered what Morefield (2014) describes as a deflective form of imperial apologetics, which sought to obscure and deny the violent history of empire, Hobson’s approach was by contrast redemptive. Developing a radical tradition of imperial skepticism, he sought to expose and confront what he saw to be the darkest days of imperial power, marked by a new form of violent domination:

white parasitism. In *Imperialism*, this critique of empire turned sharply to its reform. His rejection of white parasitism was followed by a searching attempt to sketch out a “far-sighted scientific statecraft” that would legitimate imperial power anew and thus stabilize world politics.³¹

If Hobson only gestured to this “statecraft” in 1902, his friends and fellow travelers on the British left would take this project deep into the twentieth century. *Imperialism*, as Claeys (2010, 285) observes, facilitated a shift among progressive imperial sceptics in Britain—including prominent Fabian and Labour figures such as Sydney Olivier (1859–1943), Leonard Woolf (1880–1969), and Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937)—toward a more favorable view of imperial power. The foregoing account suggests that it did so, in part, by offering a mode of redemptive critique that was then emulated by these figures. In the following decades, they published lengthy critiques of “imperialism” that simultaneously reached for imperial solutions (e.g., Olivier 1906; Woolf 1922). Soon to become leaders of the first Labour governments in the interwar period, they articulated a deeply interventionist and developmental vision of imperial rule, which aimed at facilitating and mediating what Olivier (1906, 1) termed “the rapidly growing interests of White capitalism in Tropical labour.”³²

Conclusion

In *Imperialism: A Study*, we find an ambitious attempt to redeem imperial power. At the theoretical core of this project was Hobson’s deeply committed view of racial difference, from which he developed an account of humanity as divided into distinct civilizations, each representing an innate capacity for labor. He relied on this framework to both articulate the wrongs of contemporary empires and suggest ameliorative measures. He used it to decouple “imperialism,” understood as white parasitism, from his ideal of a global capitalism dominated by white, Western powers; the former was to be remedied by the latter.

This reading of *Imperialism* may have been familiar to Hobson’s liberal and Fabian contemporaries but perhaps not to later readers. In 1917, Lenin extracted Hobson’s critique of finance capitalism from his racialized account

31. As I argue elsewhere, Hobson’s friend and new liberal L. T. Hobhouse (1864–1929) offered a similar redemptive critique of empire (Tan 2022).

32. For the influence of this Hobsonian group on Labour imperial policy, see for instance Gupta (1975, 31ff.); Cowen and Shenton (1991). On Olivier, see Lee (1988).

of world politics, pulling the two apart.³³ The former critique quickly came to be seen as Hobson's key intellectual contribution to debates about empire and helped to cement his reputation within the Anglo-American academy and beyond as a proto-Marxist critic of empire (Cain 2002, 231f). This reputation has proved remarkably resilient, notwithstanding Lenin's ([1917] 1964) stress on Hobson's "bourgeois social-reformism" (195). Later readers have similarly approached *Imperialism* as a deep repository of anti-imperial arguments—to be compared with that of later thinkers, tested against historical data, and redeployed in their own analyses.

This article has sought to specify what we might miss when reading him narrowly as a critic of empire. It takes its cue from historical scholarship that has recast Hobson, against his broader reception, more firmly as an imperial apologist—or that at least complicates his talismanic stature as an anti-imperialist. One productive approach has been to uncover his debts to earlier radical critiques of finance capitalism, which renders his own less innovative.³⁴ Scholars have also demonstrated his ideological affinities with contemporary currents of imperialist apologetics among metropolitan liberals and socialists.³⁵ More recent work, especially by those recovering the racist origins of disciplinary international relations, has firmly positioned Hobson within the racialized imaginaries of Anglo-American political thought in the early twentieth century (Bell 2007, 58–62, 248; Hobson 2012, 45–51; Vitalis 2015, 40f.).

Building on this scholarship, I have asked here what Hobson himself understood to be racial difference and its significance. Recognizing the specificity of "race" in Hobson's imperial thought enables us to see that both his imperial skepticism and imperial commitments were tied closely together by his racial ontology. In other words, his imperial apologetics were not detached from, or opposed to, his more famous critique. *Imperialism* sought to adjudicate between different visions of racial hierarchy—between white domination that was "parasitic" and that which was not. It was on these grounds that Hobson defended forms of imperial domination such as indirect rule. There exists an underlying coherence in his thinking about empire, which is missed by interpretive approaches that focus on tracing his views on "financial

33. This is despite the fact that Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaya (1869–1939), a Marxist activist and intellectual in her own right, had reproduced for Lenin many of Hobson's remarks on race quoted here for the writing of his 1917 pamphlet: Levin (1968, 405–36, 405n33). Other contemporary Marxists on the continent made little to no use of Hobson's text: Day and Gaido (2012, 15f).

34. The key work here is Claeys (2010). See also Cain (2007); Visana (2022, 175–83).

35. See n5.

imperialism,” narrowly construed, or those that read his talk of “race” as reflecting a later view of “culture.”

As such, it may be more apt to view Hobson not as a socialist or liberal imperialist but as a proponent of racial capitalism. Though this might strike a dissonant note with some readers, viewing him this way discloses how he sought to legitimize an unequal world beyond white “parasitism.” It also helps to specify the distance between Hobson’s articulation of “imperialism”—including the redemptive posture undergirding it—and that of close contemporaries such as W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) or Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), who scholars have recently noted offered strikingly divergent accounts of empire (Getachew and Pitts 2022, xxv–xxvii; Visana 2022, 175–83). We might, then, think more carefully about what is required if we wish to reanimate Hobson’s arguments for our own ends—if at all.³⁶

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36. On anticolonial strategies of reanimation, see Getachew and Mantena (2021, 372ff.).

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