

16.6 John Hobson Critiques Imperialism (1902)

Source: John A. Hobson, *Imperialism, A Study* (London: James Nisbet, 1902).

Background: John Hobson was an English economist and critic of British imperialism. As a reporter covering the Boer War (1899-1902) in South Africa he decided that imperialism was a result of the expansion of capitalism and a major cause of war. Because of his opposition to imperialism, he became an opponent of World War I. Hobson's writing on imperialism influenced the ideas of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, communist thinkers who became leaders of the Russian Revolution. Examine passages A-D and answer questions 1-5.

Questions

1. According to Hobson, why did capitalist industrialization lead to imperialism?
2. How did technological change and the spread of industry to other nations contribute to imperialism?
3. Does Hobson believe imperialism is inevitable? Explain.
4. Why was Hobson critical of imperialism?
5. Do you agree or disagree with Hobson's views about capitalism and imperialism? Explain.

A. It was this sudden demand for foreign markets for manufactures and for investments which was avowedly responsible for the adoption of Imperialism as a political policy . . . They needed Imperialism because they desired to use the public resources of their country to find profitable employment for their capital which otherwise would be superfluous (77-78).

B. Every improvement of methods of production, every concentration of ownership and control, seems to accentuate the tendency. As one nation after another enters the machine economy and adopts advanced industrial methods, it becomes more difficult for its manufacturers, merchants, and financiers to dispose profitably of their economic resources, and they are tempted more and more to use their Governments in order to secure for their particular use some distant undeveloped country by annexation and protection (80-81).

C. The process, we may be told, is inevitable, and so it seems upon a superficial inspection. Everywhere appear excessive powers of production, excessive capital in search of investment. It is admitted by all business men that the growth of the powers of production in their country exceeds the growth in consumption, that more goods can be produced than can be sold at a profit, and that more capital exists than can find remunerative investment. It is this economic condition of affairs that forms the taproot of Imperialism. If the consuming public in this country raised its standard of consumption to keep pace with every rise of productive powers, there could be no excess of goods or capital clamorous to use Imperialism in order to find markets: foreign trade would indeed exist (81).

D. This is the entire issue of empire. A people limited in number and energy and in the land they occupy have the choice of improving to the utmost the political and economic management of their own land, confining themselves to such accessions of territory as are justified by the most economical disposition of a growing population; or they may proceed, like the slovenly farmer, to spread their power and energy over the whole earth, tempted by the speculative value or the quick profits of some new market, or else by mere greed of territorial acquisition, and ignoring the political and economic wastes and risks involved by this imperial career (92).