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William Brown (2016) **‘Navigating uneven and combined development: Britain’s Africa policy in historical perspective’**

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The early years of the twenty first century saw a renewed focus on Africa within Britain’s foreign policy. Although not a major feature of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s initial years in office, a series of events and trends – from increasing emphasis on development cooperation and global poverty reduction to intervention in Sierra Leone – pushed Africa up the policy agenda. The continent was declared a major focus of Blair’s second administration culminating in the Commission for Africa and the G8 summit at Gleneagles in July 2005. Policy priorities shifted somewhat in the aftermath of the financial crisis and with the advent of Conservative-led governments from 2010. Yet even so, by 2015 Africa was still a key focus of a much-enlarged UK development cooperation effort – Africa being the largest regional recipient of UK aid – and declared ‘at the heart’ of UK foreign policy on development and security issues (Duddridge 2015).

The renewed focus on Africa, from Blair onwards, brought forth a host of historical parallels. For some, Blair’s liberalism and desire to transform and ‘heal’ Africa, resurrected Victorian liberal ideals of progress in the ‘dark continent’ (Brown 2006; Williams and Young 2009; Duffield and Hewitt 2009). For others, the ideational importance of Africa continued the deeply-embedded British conceptions of Africa as an ‘empty space’ where Britain could ‘do good’ (Gallagher 2013). For others still, the focus on Africa and the increasing challenge to western influence posed by Chinese engagement with the continent presaged a ‘new scramble for Africa’ (Carmody 2011). Indeed, Africa’s very rise up the policy agenda, coming after a period of relative neglect in the 1980s and early 1990s in which Africa was of marginal concern to UK governments (Ireton 2014), was itself redolent of a shift in British policy that occurred in the late 19th century. Then, Africa had moved from a landmass whose significance ‘lay in the transitory importance of its shores to the enterprises flowing past them’ to taking centre stage in a rapid expansion of colonial control (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015, 14).

However, if we look at the aims and prospects of recent British policy towards Africa, we find that such parallels do not by themselves grasp the dynamic and changing nature of interaction between the Britain and Africa. Indeed, the legacies of the past weigh heavily on the present as revitalised aims for liberal transformation in Africa came up against the legacies of past interaction. This chapter explores the historical evolution of Britain’s policy towards Africa using ideas drawn from the theory of uneven and combined development. I argue that we can understand shifts in British policy towards Africa as attempts to navigate problems thrown up by the developmentally highly uneven nature of the relationship and the contradictory developmental outcomes of combined development. As such, it posits the key location for understanding changes in British policy as the point of interaction *between* Britain and Africa. In doing so the chapter also draws on the ideas of Ronald Robinson in locating the vicissitudes of British imperial policy as reactive and interactive manoeuvres with non-European political actors (Robinson 1972 and 1986).

The chapter has two main aims. First, and most substantively, it seeks to outline an evolving dynamic in relations between Britain and Africa whereby the legacies of past processes of combined development shape and constrain current and future policy choices. Second, at a broader level, by locating the point of analysis on relations between British and African actors it seeks to investigate ways of developing less Eurocentric accounts, creating space for understanding the impact of non-European agency, even while the focus remains on British, and wider Western, policy. It seeks to do this by using both the more general depiction of international relations provided by uneven and combined development and the more specific ‘excentric’ analysis of imperialism developed by Robinson.

The chapter is organised around three key phases in British Africa policy: the advent of colonial rule; the evolution of colonial development policy prior to independence; and the resurgence of liberal transformatory aims within British policy this century. The chapter briefly sets out some of the theoretical and conceptual issues on which it draws in analysing these three periods before taking each in turn.

Unevenness and ‘excentric’ imperialism

This chapter draws on Justin Rosenberg’s work on uneven and combined development to frame an account of the evolution of, and challenges facing British Africa policy¹. It does this in two main ways. First, it uses uneven and combined development to characterise evolutions in British policy as attempts to navigate a highly uneven and interactive relationship with Africa. Uneven and combined development posits international relations in general as social processes of interaction between unevenly developed societies². The world is and always has been composed of multiple societies that are unevenly developed across a range of economic, social, cultural, technological and political dimensions; they all have to engage with the ‘outside world’ in some way and have institutions and processes relating to managing diplomacy in its ‘broadest sense’ (Rosenberg 2006, 320). The development of any one society over time therefore is inherently a process of combination – a dialectical, dynamic and inter-societally interactive unfolding of multiple causal factors. However, the advent and expansion of industrial capitalism accelerated and intensified these processes of interaction making ‘development’ as a whole a world-wide, combined and in many respects increasingly uneven, process. Seen through this lens, British policy towards Africa, from the 19th century onwards, represents an extremely uneven case of inter-societal interaction, driven initially by the expansion of British and wider (uneven) European capitalist industrialisation. However, both in the early period of colonisation and more recently, this unevenness played out in ways that have often limited the successful realisation of British policy aims.

The second use of uneven and combined development is to explain why British Africa policy aims have often been frustrated. The theory argues that rather than producing a homogeneous international system, inter-societal interaction produces successive novel, hybrid and heterogeneous developmental outcomes and forms of state among ‘catch-up’ or ‘later developing’ countries. This insight is of key importance in understanding the evolution of British policy in Africa over time. At various points – in the pre-colonisation period, the early years of colonisation, in the late colonial promotion of ‘development’ and more recently –

liberal transformatory aims have animated British policy towards Africa. Yet at each point, the heterogeneous outcomes of combined development have frustrated liberal ambitions. British policy as a result shows phases of advancing and then stepping back from, the pursuit of liberal change in Africa. As with other historical and contemporary policy examples, where universal liberal principles collide with a highly differentiated world³, processes of uneven and combined development in Africa have presented to British policy makers an evolving set of dilemmas.

Recognition of the importance of European development and expansion has been a mainstay of both orthodox and more radical accounts of the European role in Africa in the colonial and post-colonial eras. However, in those accounts not only is the direction of interaction almost entirely one-way traffic – European or Western expansion into or impositions on Africa – but the role of unevenness is cashed in largely in terms of European technological, economic and military advantage over Africa. The Africanist historian Frederick Cooper noted this very point:

‘Scholars have been too quick to leap from the unevenness of power, which reached an extreme in the nineteenth century, to an assumption that capitalism, Europe, or colonialism was necessarily an overwhelming force in the world. ... Scholars have trouble conceptualizing asymmetrical relationships, which nonetheless do not imply total power of one side over the other. To explore such relationships is to see the limits of power as well as its extent and above all to look at how people of the weaker end of the connection pushed back...’ (Cooper 2014, 9).

Acknowledging the role of ‘people at the weaker end’ is a crucial step if we are to move away from more Eurocentric accounts and to explain the production of the varied and divergent outcomes from interaction. One of promises of the theory of uneven and combined development is that it provides more scope for doing just this (Hobson 2011; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015).

It was a critique of orthodox and radical theories of imperialism, and their failure to acknowledge the role of non-European actors in accounts of imperialism, that characterised Ronald Robinson’s work (1972, 1986)⁴. In it, and in his work with John Gallagher (Gallagher and Robinson 1953; Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015), Robinson sought to give an ‘excentric’ account of British Africa policy, one which located the causal dynamic at the point of interaction between an expansionist Britain and the non-European societies it came into contact with. According to Robinson, ‘when imperialism is looked at as an inter-continental process, its true metropolis appears neither at the centre nor the periphery, but in their changing relativities’ (Robinson 1986, 271).

Perhaps most interestingly for our purposes, Robinson developed an account in which a key role is played by the variation (perhaps read ‘unevenness’) that existed among the non-European societies which Britain encountered; the varied reactions of those societies to European expansion; and the different economic and political outcomes that resulted from such interactions. These elements are most clearly seen in Robinson’s account of the period of British colonisation of Africa in the late 19th century and the following section draws heavily on that account. As we will see, these varied processes laid the basis for later challenges facing Britain’s Africa policy. However, as Robinson himself did in later work,

the chapter will bring forward key insights of this account of colonisation into the post-colonial period as well.

Scrambling, or ‘fumbling to adjust’?

Britain’s accelerating industrial development and international expansion in the mid- to late-19th century meant that its interaction with Africa was characterised among other things by two important trends: increasing intensity and increasing unevenness. The combination of both resulted in a massive expansion of British territorial possessions in Africa. However, the route by which that outcome was arrived at was neither straightforward nor dictated by trends in Britain alone.

‘The most striking fact about British history in the nineteenth century’ Gallagher and Robinson noted, ‘...is that it is the history of an expanding society’ with industrialization causing an extended and intensified impact overseas (Gallagher and Robinson 1953, 5). However, in marked contrast to the mercantilist era, while British power was deployed to enforce the *pax Britannica*, ‘liberation’ rather than acquisition was the goal, and free trade rather than monopoly was the means to achieve it (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015, 4). For the mid-century Victorians, empire assumed a moral purpose, not to rule the world but to redeem it (Ferguson 2003). And it was thought that commerce, perhaps accompanied by the other c’s – Christianity and civilisation – would by itself liberate other peoples from their ‘backward’ and ‘despotic’ societies (Pakenham 1991). Indeed, in contrast to some other accounts of the Scramble for Africa, Robinson and Gallagher argued that the eventual acquisition of territory at the end of the century was not driven by a sharp change in British policy per se. Rather, policy was relatively consistent across the century, seeking to encourage and protect British commercial expansion and political influence by whatever means were needed but with a preference for avoiding territorial expansion (Gallagher and Robinson 1953, 13). As Robinson later framed it, ‘By informal means if possible, by formal means if necessary, imperialism integrated new regions into international capitalist economy, providing local *pax* and strategic protection’ (Robinson 1986, 281).

Indeed, the focus of British expansion was often not within the formal empire. Just prior to the Scramble, over half British investment and two thirds of exports went to areas not under British political control (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015, 8). In Latin America, for example, integration into British-dominated international trade meant that the need for political and military intervention by Britain was limited. Nevertheless, continued industrial expansion ‘made new demands upon British policy’ as new and varied underdeveloped areas came within the British orbit (Gallagher and Robinson 1953, 7-8). The unevenness of the world Britain was encountering also meant that a whole range of strategies were deployed, from commercial treaty (the main form by which Britain gave formal recognition to other polities), to anti-slavery treaties signed with African leaders, to protectorates and outright colonisation, creating a patchwork liberal empire of formal and informal relationships (Gallagher and Robinson 1953, 11).

Colonisation, furthermore, only occurred where it was seen as both necessary and possible by British policy makers. ‘Not all regions will reach the same level of economic integration at any one time’ Gallagher and Robinson wrote, ‘neither will all regions need the same type of

political control at any one time.’ (1953, 6). This unevenness among non-European societies, and the ways in which they reacted to British expansion, therefore had a key role in shaping the strategies Britain deployed. Formal political control was sought only when informal influence was not sufficient to secure economic or geopolitical aims, but also only where it was politically or military feasible. Often these two conditions did not obtain. In Latin America and areas of British settlement, it was often regarded as unnecessary. In parts of Asia – China and the Ottoman empire – greater political control might have been seen as desirable, given the barriers to British and European commerce that remained stubbornly in place, but there were severe limits to achieving it (Gallagher and Robinson 1953). In Africa, meanwhile, political take-over did eventually come to be seen as necessary (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015; Robinson, 1986).

Three key points are worth noting at this point. First, although takeover came to be seen as ‘necessary’ in Africa, from a British point of view, it was possible only in a restricted sense – through the construction of very particular forms of political rule centred on a limited commitment of resources and military force combined with a creation and strengthening of what were represented as ‘traditional’ African political structures (discussed more in the following section). This bequeathed deeply problematic legacies for those societies once independence was won, and indeed for later British policy makers.

Second, the ‘need’ for colonisation manifested itself in very different ways in different parts of Africa, at least from the British perspective. Unevenness within Africa, and the fluidity of the wider geopolitical pressures on Britain, meant that the establishment of colonies should not be seen as a mono-causal process. The British entry into Africa, in this view, arose from disparate situations, all ‘products of different historical evolutions, some arising from national growth or decay, others from European expansion... All of them were changing at different levels at different speeds.’ (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015, 466).

Third and more generally, we should note that this understanding of colonisation makes a decisive move away from Eurocentric accounts and establishes a critical role for the societies and peoples ‘of the weaker end of the connection’ (Cooper 2014: 9). It was precisely those non-European agents who the British at the time regarded as ‘without history’ (Wolf 1982), and the varied patterns of resistance and accommodation they pursued, who shaped whether, where, when and how the British resorted to formal imperialism. Colonisation, and British policy choices, were shaped by indigenous politics as well as European: ‘...from beginning to end imperialism was product of interaction between European and extra-European politics’ (Robinson 1972, 118-9).

The unevenness of ‘extra-European politics’ that confronted the British in the late 19th century was itself, of course, the product of multiple prior processes of combined development too complex to trace here. Nevertheless, two factors are worth highlighting briefly for their role in subsequent British expansion in Africa – the impact of the slave trade, and African reactions to earlier phases of European expansion.

The collaborative informal imperialism that Britain pursued for much of the 19th century in Africa was itself not new but rather had been at the core of the slave trade which ‘combined European initiative with African collaboration’ – Europeans financing and organising the

trade and Africans dominating the capture and delivery of slaves prior to transportation (Wolf 1982, 204). Leaving the unimaginable human impact to one side, the political effects were also important though collaboration had highly divergent political impacts on African polities (Wolf 1982; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015). Some, such as Benin were for a time able to strengthen and consolidate their existing structures. In others, such as Asante, Oyo and Dahomey, the trade helped to fuel state formation itself, giving rise to new and increasingly powerful polities. In other regions, notably the Congo, the increasing reach of slaving into the interior ultimately weakened existing political structures to the point of collapse. The supply from Europe of firearms, as well as other elite goods, added to the dynamic processes of change, radically altering the balance of power in many regions, and allowing the emergence of new combined forms of state (Wolf 1982; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015).

Despite Britain abolishing the slave trade in 1807, 2 million more slaves were transported from Africa between 1810 and 1870 (Wolf 1982, 196). The British expectation had been that 'legitimate commerce' would naturally eclipse slave-based production. 'The actual course of events' Waites noted, 'was very different' Waites (1999: 109). Indeed, not only did slavery continue but the very products of legitimate trade such as palm oil, came to the market on the backs of slave labour (Waites 1999). In trying to curtail what Britain had earlier done so much to bring about, and address the slavery that Livingstone referred to as 'an open sore of the world' (Pakenham 1991, 1), Britain was drawn into ever deeper involvement in African politics.

The second factor to note is what Idahosa and Shenton have called the national developmental responses in Africa to the 'wave of European modernity' (2004). In places as diverse as Tunisia and Madagascar, existing elites initiated processes of reform, state building and development designed to fend off increasing European influence. In Asante, ruling elites actively sought to draw on European expertise and training in consolidating the state and implement a policy of 'peace, trade and open roads' with the Europeans (Idahosa and Shenton 2004, 78-9). And in Ethiopia, attempts at modernisation and military reorganisation were able to hold off colonisation, despite military defeats by the British, until the arrival of Italian fascism in the 1930s (Idahosa and Shenton 2004; Makki, 2011). The key importance of these efforts were not, that they were successful – most were not. More, it was that they were emblematic of the manoeuvring, resistance and accommodation to European expansion seen across Africa.

Two further cases were of crucial importance to the unfolding of the Scramble for Africa – Egypt and South Africa. Of overriding importance to British concerns in the late 19th century was India, the economic gains from which kept Britain abreast of its increasingly powerful rivals in Europe and America (Wolf 1982, 312). Yet for most of the 19th century Britain sought to ensure the safety of routes to India, via the Cape in South Africa and later Suez in Egypt, through informal influence or in the case of Cape Colony, limited territorial acquisition. But in both cases, the strategy came unstuck, leading not only to occupation of both areas but successive occupations in the upper Nile Valley in Sudan and Uganda, and in southern Africa in Rhodesia and Nyasaland (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015).

Following Napoleon's defeat and removal from Egypt, Mehemet Ali oversaw a centralisation of government finance, modernisation of the military, and Egyptian territorial expansion and

national economic regulation (Idahosa and Shenton 2004; Gallagher and Robinson 1953). Increasing integration with Europe followed, notably through investment in the Suez Canal and extensive lending from European banks. Bankrupt by 1876, political revolt in Egypt aimed at limiting European influence and threatened both the canal and European bank loans and led eventually to British occupation in 1882 (Gallagher and Robinson 1953, 14). Though designed as a temporary expedition, so difficult was the task of recreating a collaborative political settlement, that the British remained in Egypt until 1956.

In South Africa, British occupation had been limited to the Cape Colony, seeking to have enough presence there to secure the coast and exert influence over the Boers to limit their political ambitions and prevent them from provoking a revolt among the Africans expelled or subjugated by the Boers' march into the interior. Already antagonistic and unstable, these informal and semi-formal arrangements – with Boer republics and African polities – were ultimately destroyed by the huge expansion of economic interaction occasioned by the development of the Kimberley diamond mines. This altered 'all the conditions of South African politics' according to one British official (quoted in Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015, 58) showing how intensified economic interactions could 'tear down, as well as build up a system of colonial collaboration' ultimately leading to the Boer war (Robinson 1972, 125).

There were important consequences of both the Egyptian occupation and the ever-deeper immersion in South African politics. After Egypt, Britain ceded ground to European rivals in West Africa and to Germany in East Africa but in the official mind at least it created a pressing need to secure the upper Nile Valley. The difficulties of doing this informally – given the Mahdi rebellion in Sudan and absence of viable collaborative arrangements in East Africa – prompted further colonial expansion (Pakenham 1991). Following a very different dynamic, the economic expansion of South Africa led to Rhodes' expeditions northwards, overcoming the resistance of the Ndebele and establishing new British protectorates, later to become colonies, in southern Africa.

Even in West Africa, attempts to rule through informal means ultimately came up against the difficulties posed by African polities creaking under pressure of an intensifying European presence. In Gold Coast, collaboration with Asante eventually broke down as other European powers pressed their interests with the until then powerful Asante elite, leading to the (failed) assertion of a British protectorate in 1891 and final colonisation in 1901 (Warner 1999; 2001). In Lagos, the frustration of British attempts to remove rulers engaged in slavery led ultimately to annexation. In both cases, the move towards colonisation in one location had further consequences leading to 'an inexorable British advance inland' (Havenden and Meredith, 1993, 52-60).

Thus while the Scramble for Africa is often presented as a relatively coherent and uniform process of colonisation it was in fact an uneven and differentiated set of events even just within the British case (German, French, Portuguese and Belgian expansion each had their own dynamics). While occasioned by the intensification of increasingly uneven interactions between Britain and a variety of African polities, British policy showed itself to be a reactive and evolving response to the varied situations across Africa. The perceived need for imperialist relations to take the form of colonial empire rested on the absence or collapse of

viable collaborators (Robinson 1986, 271-3; 1972). Yet, too often the Europeans forced indigenous elites to play for too high stakes, cutting them off from traditional bases of support and forcing Europeans to change tack. ‘More often than not’ Robinson concluded, ‘it was this non-European component of European expansion that necessitated the extension of colonial empires’ (1972, 130).

From an earlier belief in the power of the informal ‘empire of liberty’ to transform the world, the realities of the late 19th century expansion into the diverse polities of Africa presented a far more difficult prospect to the British. The reality of expansion ‘shocked’ policy makers into a realisation that ‘the growth of communities into harmonious commercial and political partnership with Britain was not after all a law of nature’ (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015, 469). The unplanned acquisition of a succession of African colonies was the result. And yet, as Cooper notes, ‘Empires... had to make their power felt in particular contexts. Conquest was usually the easier part of empire building: administering an empire – let alone transforming societies – was the hard part’ (Cooper 2014: 10). By the start of the 20th century, the difficulties of ruling and developing the regions now under British control posed a new set of dilemmas.

Development and control

If the British acquisition of an African empire can be seen as the outcome of its attempts to manage the increasing intensity and unevenness of the emerging economic and political relations it now had with African societies, its approach to governing and developing the colonies it now possessed was no less easy to navigate. A key constraint on policy was the continuing influence of the Victorian unwillingness to commit large amounts of men and money overseas. As a result Victorian ambitions of liberal transformation were curtailed and the British ‘became less concerned to liberate social energies abroad and concentrated on preserving authority’ (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015, 470; Mamdani 1996). Even if resources had been available, the Indian mutiny had left an ‘indelible mark’ on the Victorians, demonstrating that westernization was a ‘dangerous and explosive business’ (Robinson, Gallagher and Denny 2015, 10). One colonial governor in West Africa, argued against more ambitious aims of transformation, ‘...if we allow the tribal authority to be ignored or broken, it will mean that we, who numerically form a small minority in the country, shall be obliged to deal with a rabble... There could only be one end to such a policy, and that would be eventual conflict with the rabble’ (Sir P. Girouard quoted in Lugard 1965: 216). Pacification, and pacification on the cheap at that, became the overriding goal (Idahosa and Shenton 2004; Robinson 1972).

The key collaborative mechanism utilised to achieve this end was what became known as ‘indirect rule’ codified in Lord Lugard’s *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1965). Colonial states operating along these lines can be seen as a particular combination of different forms of rule. Mamdani (1996: 19) described them, as ‘bifurcated’ states:

‘...the colonial state was a double sided affair. Its one side, the state that governed a racially defined citizenry, was bounded by the rule of law and an associated regime of rights. Its other side, the state that ruled over subjects, was a regime of extra-economic coercion and administratively driven justice.’ (1996: 19)

That is, one side of the state, concentrated on urban areas, approximated the impersonal, 'civil' political form of rule of modern capitalist states based on law, albeit racially defined; the other side consisted of various forms of customary and personal rule, non- or only partial separation of labour and from the land, extra-economic coercion and exploitation, and concentrated in rural areas. They were two arms of a single polity within an over-arching colonial authority.

Moreover, each side of these bifurcated states were themselves forms of combined development. The rural side of the state was based on supposed African 'customary rule'. Yet, according to Mamdani, customary rule was neither an authentic expression of Africanness, nor an entirely European invention. It was the product of the colonial imagination and the articulation of colonial power with pre-colonial societies which were in any case in a state of flux. Imperialists gave recognition to 'native' traditions – 'to build up a tribal authority with recognised legal standing' (Lugard 1965: 217) – and accentuated and refashioned existing communities and polities. In many places this preserved or enhanced rather than transformed the 'tribal' or ethnic basis of what Europeans saw as the essential basis of African societies, strengthening 'ethnic compartmentalisation' and reinforcing the authority (and authoritarianism) of rural elites (Robinson 1972, 136; also see Mamdani, 1996; and Havinden and Meredith 1993, 75).

In the urban centres of power, while a racialised form of 'civil rule' was constructed, fiscal pressures meant that it was a state shaped by their particular colonial conditions. The principle that colonies should be self-financed from revenue or self-financed commercial loans was a tenacious one in British policy (Ireton 2013, 5-6). Though direct taxation was at times used, either in kind, in labour, or money, indirect taxation of imports and exports was the chief means of raising finance for infrastructural development and to pay administrative costs of colonies. It was both cheap to collect and avoided more extensive intrusions into the newly tribalised rural populations (Idahosa and Shenton 2004, 82). Where direct taxation was used, collection was often farmed out to the chiefs and headmen who utilised their mediating role to enrich themselves as well as fund the colonial administration (Idahosa and Shenton 2004, 82; Robinson 1986). Cooper (2002) labelled the states that grew out of these constraints 'gatekeeper states' sitting astride the 'gate' through which imports and exports flowed in order to raise finance by the least troublesome means they could. They too, can therefore also be seen as products of combination, neither African nor European, 'they emerged out of a peculiar Euro-African history' (Cooper 2002: 160).

In some respects, indirect rule, itself a form of collaboration, allowed the British to re-establish control in place of the systems that had broken down prior to the Scramble. Rural authorities served as intermediaries between the urban centres of authority and the mass of the population in the countryside. This made 'playing' African politics easier for the British because government patronage – honours, contracts and social services – was easier to dispense (Robinson 1972). Also, in order to sustain their own administrations, colonial authorities began to develop infrastructure in places such as Nigeria and Ghana if for no other reason than to facilitate the flow of trade which could be taxed (Havinden and Meredith 1993, 101-103).

Nevertheless, pressures grew to do more than simply sustain colonial administration on the cheap. By the early 20th century there were already policy differences emerging. So-called ‘social imperialists’ saw in colonial expansion a means of serving British interests as well as providing moral and social improvement to indigenous populations while remaining conservative with regard to initiatives aimed at capitalist development in rural areas (Gallagher 2013). On the other hand, ‘imperial reformers’, led most notably by Joseph Chamberlain, were more ambitious (Gallagher 2013, 38). ‘We are landlords of a great estate’ Chamberlain proclaimed, ‘it is the duty of a landlord to develop his estate’ (quoted in Havinden and Meredith 1993, 88). The idea that British rule would benefit Africans had been around for some time but as Gallagher points out, the idea that it would be the state actively driving this, whether through Chamberlain’s imperial assistance or Lugard’s indirect rule, was a new idea (Gallagher 2013, 49)⁵.

However, shifts in British policy, to more fully address the idea of development of the colonies, were typically slow and reactive. In the 1924 and again in 1926 concessions on loans for capital projects were made available to colonies in Africa and in 1929 parliament passed the Colonial Development Fund Act providing funding for capital projects in those colonies without ‘responsible government’ – mainly the West Indies and Africa (Ireton 2013, 7; Morgan 1980). However, even here motives were mixed. Gladstonian principles of avoiding long-term financial commitments still prevailed and British interests – to stimulate British employment through increased trade – were key factors in passing of the Act.

Between the wars, British policy never fully resolved the tension inherent in Lugard’s dual mandate, pulled as it was between the need to organise the empire for home benefit at a time of high unemployment and the increasing focus on trusteeship that flowed from the Paris Peace conference (Havinden and Meredith 1993, 138). Hopes were raised in the colonies of development and social spending that could only be delivered through injections of public money while back in London the Treasury maintained a commitment to self-financing, ‘empire on the cheap’ (Havinden and Meredith 1993, 138). Though imperial preference was increased between the wars, other initiatives to promote trade within the empire, for example through the empire marketing board, were half-hearted (Havinden and Meredith 1993).

By the mid- to late 1930s a number of factors began to push Britain to reconsider its policy. First, demands increased from Nazi Germany for the return of its colonies mandated to Britain after the First World War. The demand was rejected but it increased pressure on Britain to show that it was living up to its commitments on ‘trusteeship’ in all its colonies (Morgan 1980). Second, the failure of Britain, along with the rest of the League of Nations, to take any meaningful action against Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia seriously undermined British standing in the colonies and helped to fuel nascent nationalist movements (Havinden and Meredith 1993, 194-7). Third, the colonies themselves were struggling to maintain their finances. Having allowed colonies to borrow, the depression meant most struggled to increase exports sufficiently to generate the surpluses necessary to service their debts (Havinden and Meredith 1993, 179). Finally, and perhaps most dramatically, labour riots in the West Indies and labour unrest in some African colonies prompted a resurgence of debate about the social and economic conditions within the colonies (Havinden and Meredith 1993, 194-7). Numerous publications, including several on the anti-colonial political left, drew attention to the poor economic and social conditions in the colonies and the government itself

commissioned Lord Hailey of the Royal Institute of International Affairs to address the absence of basic statistical information in his *An African Survey* published in 1938 (Morgan 1980). In presenting his report in 1938, Hailey said of the commitment to trusteeship, ‘I sometimes wish that we could place our hands on our hearts a little less, and set them to explore our pockets a little more’ (quoted in Morgan 1980, 28).

One outcome was the 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act providing a much-enhanced fund for colonial development and for research into the colonies. The shift from the 1929 Act was notable, with a much more explicit focus on colonial development (Ireton 2013, 7-8). There was also a new commitment to work towards self-government within the British empire. Nevertheless, funds under the CDW Act remained small in comparison to the developmental needs of the colonies (Ireton 2013, 17). Moreover, post-war conditions were so dire in Britain that there were severe limits on the level of public investment in the colonies and a need to address the severe shortages in Britain, somewhat blunting the commitment to ‘new standards of trusteeship’.

Perhaps more fundamental was the continued drag on ambition that arose from concerns with maintaining British authority. Development threatened to weaken the ‘traditional’ authorities on which British rule rested. As Robinson put it: ‘The less the pro-consuls demanded of their mediators in the way of reform, the safer they were; and the more they tried to develop societies into modern, secular shapes, the harder it became to solve collaborative equations’ (Robinson 1986, 280). As a result, even with a greater commitment to development from London, many governors dragged their feet. In places, colonial authorities ‘followed policies that were directly and indirectly inimical to the development of colonial capitalism... where development seemed to lead away from a peasant-based society, local officials were far more cautious’ (Havinden and Meredith 1993, 158). Policy ought to ‘preserve the social organisations we have inherited and modify them only gradually... within the limits set by the tolerable pace of social change’ as Arthur Creech Jones put it (quoted in Havinden and Meredith 1993, 312-3). The growth of a waged urban working class was ‘universally feared’ (Idahosa and Shenton 2004: 84).

Complicating matters further, development also threatened to build up the proto-nationalist forces in the colonies. Increases in social expenditure led to expanding administrations and, particularly at the local level, a growing cadre of educated Africans. This not only generated conflict with the chiefs, who feared the loss of their pivotal position between colonisers and rural population, it also brought colonial administrators up against the newly emerging African ‘political class’ who used staffing and financing of local government as resources for nationalist party-building (Dorman 2015; Gabay 2015; Idahosa and Shenton 2004; see also Allen 1995). Further moves to strengthen the position of ‘moderate Africans’ by devolving power, and developing electoral representation, merely increased these trends. The result, as Cooper noted, was that the developmental colonialism of the 1950s had decreasing room for manoeuvre (Cooper 2002: 53). The Mau Mau rebellion and growing opposition in Gold Coast and Nigeria further raised the costs of maintaining a developmentalist empire.

Speaking in 1940, Lord Hailey had presciently claimed ‘History will look back on this period as being the most critical stage of African development; errors made now... may well create situations which the future can rectify only at the cost of great effort and much human

distress' (quoted in Havinden and Meredith 1993, 204-5). And indeed, the legacies of Britain's often faltering attempts to manage its relations with Africa left long legacies for both the states that eventually emerged independent in the 1960s and 1970s, and for later British policy makers⁶.

The late reprise of liberal transformation

For much of the period after independence, Britain's relationship with Africa was characterised by 'disengagement, withdrawal and damage limitation' (Porteus 2008, 7). Conflict in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, where the majority of Britain's commercial and strategic interests were focussed, was the main priority in African diplomacy (Porteus 2008, 8). By the 1990s, even the Cold War-driven concerns in southern Africa had faded and commercial ties with other regions had further eroded Africa's importance to Britain as well as to other European countries. The limited but important powers that independence brought had been well deployed by African governments to try to limit external influence over domestic politics. Conservative governments had proven keen to leave the manifest developmental and peace-keeping and humanitarian challenges to multilateral organisations and the European Commission and after 1979 aid budgets were under severe pressure (Ireton 2013). And yet, by the turn of the century, Africa was not only rising up the policy agenda in Britain, absorbing ever more prime ministerial attention, but was also the focus of a revitalisation of a British policy agenda aimed at liberal transformation.

The reasons why Africa should have become such an important issue under the Labour governments after 1997 are varied. Labour's pledge to create a new international development department and to have an ethical dimension to foreign policy, together with the increasing influence of large development-oriented NGOs were key factors. A series of political and military crises – in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone – added to the focus on Africa. Internationally, moves to address African states' unsustainable debt burden, and a greater emphasis on poverty reduction as a shared international goal, laid the foundation for a fuller engagement with 'Africa' as a policy issue (Gallagher, 2013; Porteus 2008). Concerns about security, especially after 9/11, and migration, added to a perception that the pre-existing 'hands-off' approach to Africa policy could not last.

Britain's re-engagement with developmental challenges in Africa coincided with a widespread rethink among donors about how to promote development and the role of overseas aid⁷. Fundamentally, this was a debate about how to achieve economic growth in Africa through liberal political and economic change. This emerging post-Cold War policy discourse suited Labour's values, rooted as it is in the positive developmental role of human rights, democracy and better governance (Gallagher 2013, 6). It added a more political dimension to development discourses while also softening some of the harsher edges of the extant 'neoliberal' focus on economic liberalisation (Carothers and De Gramont 2013). Moreover, the new policy consensus chimed with the political orientation of the prime minister who famously drew Africa into the centre of foreign policy in the wake of the attack on the World Trade Centre, proclaiming in his 2001 Labour Party Conference speech that 'The state of Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focussed on it, we could heal it' (Blair 2001).

Blair's own approach to Africa was morally-driven in a way that was strongly redolent of the early 20th century imperial reformers (Gallagher 2013). Indeed, Inderjeet Parmar (2005: 222-3) has traced the links between Blair's liberal internationalism and turn of the twentieth century imperial visions. The influence on Blair of 'New Liberal' social reformers such as J. MacMurray and T.H. Green, and Christian socialists such as R.H. Tawney, shaped his view of politics and history as a moral striving for societal improvement. This tradition also influenced Blair's international vision and especially his favourable view of 'imperialist' humanitarian actions abroad (Parmar 2005: 225). Julia Gallagher too, notes how under New Labour, Africa policy was 'set aside' from other policy areas, an imagined space, untrammelled by the complexities of domestic politics, where Britain could 'do good' (Gallagher 2013, 4). The terrorist attacks on New York gave a compelling strategic argument to add to this moral focus on Africa's 'problems' (Porteus 2008, 42).

Like Victorian visions of an expansive realm of liberty and prosperity, New Labour's approach was one of liberal transformation in Africa. As with those earlier periods, it required available collaborators on the African side. The result was a kind of 'liberal bargain' (Brown 2006), an exchange of aid, debt relief and policy changes on trade and other issues by the developed world on the one hand, for radical liberal reform of the way in which African states govern and pursue economic development, on the other. It was neatly summed up by Blair in his 2001 party conference speech:

'On our side: provide more aid, untied to trade; write off debt; help with good governance... access to our markets... on the African side: true democracy, no more excuses for dictatorship, abuses of human rights; no tolerance of bad governance... Proper commercial, legal and financial systems.' (2001)

Such a bargain tied in closely with the prevailing donor approach to development aid which insisted that having the right political, legal and policy conditions for aid was an essential prerequisite for aid to be effective (Kelsall et al 2013). Importantly, it also dovetailed with, and helped to reinforce, African initiatives led by South Africa and Nigeria, pushing in the same direction (Landsberg 2011). Most notably the formation of the African Union in 2001 and the launch of the New Economic Partnership for African Development (OAU 2001) – in which Blair had a significant hand too – seemed to provide the requisite partners on the African side of the bargain.

The high water-mark of Blair's pursuit of this deal came in 2005 with the publication of the Commission for Africa report, *Our Common Interest*, and the G8 summit at Gleneagles. Despite its subsequent lack of impact, the report was closer to a comprehensive statement of British policy towards Africa than anything else produced in recent decades (Porteus 2008, 62). Its vision for change in Africa set out the need for:

'...the right economic, social and legal framework which will encourage economic growth and allow poor people to participate in it... establish[ing] an economic environment that encourages investment... security, setting sound economic policies under the law, collecting taxes and delivering adequate public services like health and education... legal systems to protect basic property rights, human rights, and respect for contracts...' (Commission for Africa, 2005: 24)

Even the G8, rather more in the real political world than the Commission, were cajoled into pledging enough by way of aid increases and debt relief to suggest the west was interested in furthering the liberal deal (G8 2005)⁸.

Any aid relationship is in some respects both an expression of, and an attempt to deal with, unevenness (Brown 2009). However, when the policies around aid move from more limited aims of ameliorating the effects of underdevelopment through social and welfare spending, to far more ambitious aims of social transformation, the unevenness of the relationship becomes far more problematic. On the one hand is a disjunction between what are perceived to be the ideal – liberal – conditions for growth and development and the historical realities of the forms of state and society that exist. On the other hand is a disjunction between a ‘one-size fits all’ policy prescription of donors and the varying social, political and developmental trajectories among societies on the receiving end of aid. New Labour’s Africa policy was beset by both of these problems.

Taking the first disjuncture, taken at face value, the kind of change that Britain sought to achieve in Africa was massively ambitious. Richard Sandbrook argued that the Commission for Africa was calling for ‘nothing less than a Great Transformation’ in African societies (2005:1120). ‘In reality’, he concluded, (2005: 1123) ‘the triumph of economic and political liberalism in many countries represents, not mere reform, but revolutionary change’. The problem for British policy was that to a large extent Africa was conceived within it as a ‘blank sheet’ onto which, for the first time, Britain was inscribing a grand design, ignoring much previous history (Porteus 2008, 133; also see Gallagher, 2013). Policy makers wished to draw a new picture of British Africa policy as if on a clean sheet of paper: ‘Floating free of difficult historical implication, British officials fashion their relationship with Africa as if virtually from scratch’ (Gallagher 2013, 118). This construction of policy involved a highly simplified view of the ‘other’ (often idealised as an undifferentiated African poor) which could not admit to conflicts of interests, messy and complex relationships and the need to address distributional conflicts (Gallagher 2013, 22)⁹.

What was lacking, some noted (Lockwood 2005), were the tools with which to bridge this gap between aims and reality. Just as in asymmetrical relationships of the colonial period (Cooper 2014), so too in aid relationships, politics at the ‘non-European end’ matter a great deal. And while in the colonial period, Britain could seek to influence internal politics by intervening directly in collaboration (Robinson 1972), post-independence, the international posed a much greater obstacle. If what was driving policy was the aim of ‘social transformation at a distance’ (Williams and Young, 2009) then it was a distance not just of geography but of political independence, and histories of combined development too (see Brown 2006; 2013). The limited tools of British leverage (Porteus 2008), and the limitations imposed by Blair’s ideational construction of Africa (Gallagher 2013) both served to temper the reality of policy.

As with other liberal interventions (Anievas 2014) the second disjuncture, between uniform policy prescriptions and the diversity of political realities on the ground, merely exacerbated the problem. Donor policy from the mid-1990s had increasingly centred on a kind of ‘one-size fits all’ programme for governance reform through which to lay the necessary basis for development to take off (Kelsall et al). As Carothers and De Gramont noted, ‘The aid landscape was soon populated by projects attempting full-scale transfer of Western models, navigated by visiting Western experts with little knowledge of local contexts...’ (2013: 27). Britain’s new Africa policy suffered a similarly. Even the lengthy Commission for Africa

report, while acknowledging unevenness and the need to pay constant regard to the Africa's diversity – 'every country has a mix of social and economic realities that differ from other countries' it noted (Commission for Africa, 2005 126) – nevertheless addressed issues of governance through broad generalizations. Nowhere did it show the detailed, nuanced understanding necessary if external leverage was to have any political purchase (Porteus 2008, 76-7; Kelsall et al 2013).

As Tom Porteus has argued, fifty years earlier Britain had abandoned an empire that it knew relatively well after concluding it lacked the resources to maintain much less transform it; now it was embarking on an ambitious and costly programme of transformation with far less knowledge and expertise (2008, 134). Furthermore, policy was now run by a department (DfID) specialising in development policy rather than diplomacy and, one might add, one which had grown in size and importance somewhat at the expense of the Foreign Office and its country knowledge and diplomatic tools. While DfID shared other donors' view as to what the problems were in Africa, it relied on finding examples that worked and 'scaling them up', ignoring the diversity of conditions on the ground and difficult questions about whether generalised developmental approaches were appropriate to different African contexts (Porteus 2008, 132-3).

The Conservative-led governments in power from 2010 might have been expected to enact a revision of British policy towards Africa, particularly in a context of austerity. The response, however, was mixed. On the one hand, the coalition government of 2010-15 sustained Britain's financial commitment to overseas development, reaching the symbolic ODA commitment of 0.7% of GDP in 2013. Prime Minister Cameron also continued the liberal commitment to good governance as the basis for development. In several speeches going back to 2005 Cameron committed to a 'golden thread that links property rights, free markets, free trade, the rule of law, honest government, sound finances, economic progress and social advance' (Cameron 2005)¹⁰. However, while this formulation re-states the disjuncture of previous Labour policy, between desirable conditions and a diverse reality, and did little to identify any means by which it could be resolved, it was accompanied by more pragmatic shifts in policy.

Both in the Conservative-led coalition and the majority Tory government that followed in 2015, three shifts in particular were important. The first, in partial recognition of the difficulties of persuading countries to liberalise, was a concentration of bilateral aid on countries seen to be providing some of the necessary 'golden' conditions for development (DfID 2011). A second shift, driven by poor economic conditions in Britain and burgeoning commercial relations between Africa and China, was to alter the balance between 'doing good abroad' and British self-interest. Whereas Labour had denied any real tension between these two, the Conservative-led governments made a more overt priority of British trade development and investment interests. Finally, there was a continuation of longer-standing trends (Woods 2005) in using overseas development aid in security-related ways. The emphasis on the need for stable government in Africa served both development and security agendas and meant that development funding and security-driven projects around failed states overlapped with each other.

In recognition of the difficulties of seeking to promote ‘social transformation at a distance’ development policy analysis also took a more pragmatic turn. Donor policy had sought to promote ‘ideal’ (liberal) conditions for development through political and economic reform. The patent difficulties of achieving this in the context of diverse African politics which had their own dynamic and purpose, prompted some to argue that donors needed greater understanding of the complexities involved (Barder 2012b). Others argued that ‘good enough’ and ‘second best’ conditions for development – which might include clientelist corrupt practices and even human rights abuses – might have to be tolerated (Kelsall et al 2013). Whether this signalled a wider repetition of the colonial era retreat from liberal aims in favour of support for more authoritarian forms of rule, remained to be seen.

Conclusion

The ironies of history weigh heavily on British Africa policy. The resurgence of ‘missionary zeal’ (Parmar 2005) in British dealings with Africa was one thing; the fact that it was conducted with such apparent neglect of its historical antecedents was quite another. As this chapter has shown, contemporary British policy towards Africa is hedged on all sides by its past efforts to manage its longstanding, deep and highly uneven relationship with Africa. The policy trajectory that we see is therefore not simply a contemporary reprise of an earlier liberal imperialism. While Britain’s long-term preferences remained broadly consistent – for liberal transformation of Africa and integration into the world economy – the policy changes in pursuit of that aim have been more dynamic. The alternations in policy – from informal relations to colonisation; a transformative civilising mission to securing authority; developing the ‘great estate’ to curtailing the extent and pace of reform – all reveal an imperial power forced to tack in the face of the complex patterns of developmental unevenness it had helped to bring about.

This chapter has used the theory of uneven and combined development to reveal this dynamic and dialectical evolution. It has revealed how British policy choices continually have had to confront the complexities of previous phases of combined development which themselves have been heterogeneous. Greater historical awareness of these processes might enable greater clarity in the evaluation of contemporary policy choices. The disjuncture between aims and realities, and the diversity of different political and economic circumstances within Africa, were themselves products of processes of uneven and combined development established through the interaction of British liberal imperialism and African politics a century before.

The analysis presented here has also explored in a tentative way, the potential synergies between the general framework for understanding international relations provided by uneven and combined development and the more focussed substantive analysis of colonialism, and theorising about imperialism, of Ronald Robinson. In both, the intent has been to begin to shift the emphasis of explanation away from a narrative driven entirely from European interest and calculation and to create space within which to see the importance of those ‘at the weaker end of the connection’. For, as Cooper (2104) noted, the ‘African problems’ Britain and other Western actors now seek to address are not simply African, they are the co-productions of a deeply intertwined history.

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Endnotes

¹ Some key sources in this expanding literature are: Rosenberg 1996; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2013a; 2013b.

² This is a commonplace but often overlooked and ‘surprisingly consequential’ fact, Rosenberg notes. It is one that is recognised – empirically if not theoretically – by writers such as Eric Wolf who wrote, ‘Human populations construct their cultures in interaction with one another, and not in isolation’ (Wolf 1982, xv).

³ For example see Anievas’ examination of Wilsonian diplomacy (2014).

⁴ I don’t explore aspects of what has been termed the Robinson-Gallagher debate in this chapter (for example see Louis 1976; Porter and Holland 1988). There is also a short but interesting evaluation of Robinson’s work in Brewer’s *Marxist Theories of Imperialism* (1990) where he states ‘I see little or nothing in [his work] that is incompatible with Marxism (if that matters)’ (1990, 258).

⁵ These influences, with emphasis on how states could actively ‘do good’ were also absorbed by the early Labour Party. As we will see, New Labour’s return to Africa in this guise was a resurrection of these older ideas (Gallagher 2013, 39).

⁶ As Robinson noted, ‘all the national movements that won independence were more or less functions of neotraditional politics organised in the form of modern political parties’, they worked well as an opposition to colonial rule, much less well as developmental agent for the country as a whole (Robinson 1972, 138).

⁷ The creation of DfID in 1997 saw the first UK white paper on development for 22 years, followed by International Development Act of 2002 and further White Papers in 2000 and 2006 (Ireton 2013, 49-52).

⁸ Trade concessions were a continual sticking point and in the event only Britain stuck to its aid pledges.

⁹ There things that went with this, including a denial of fundamental between British self-interest and African welfare. Some key politicians including International Development Secretary Claire Short, denied the relevance of empire to the contemporary period (Gallagher 2013, 82).

¹⁰ In 2012 Cameron repeated the point: ‘you only get real long-term development through aid if there is also a golden thread of stable government, lack of corruption, human rights, the rule of law, transparent information’ (Cameron 2012; also see Barder 2012a).