



# Creating A New Anglo-Saxon Empire: A Post-Colonial Analysis of Alfred Milner's Constructive Imperialism

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## Abstract

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the British Empire faced numerous challenges, both external and internal. The cultural and political elite from across the Empire tried to find a solution to these crises. Alfred Milner was a member of this cultural and political elite. He contended that in order to safeguard the Empire, the Anglo-Saxon race had to embrace what he called “Constructive Imperialism” and gain an “imperial consciousness”. The aim of this article is first to analyze the nature of the crises the Empire faced, and discover the way in which they shaped Milner’s brand of Imperialism; second to situate Alfred Milner’s Constructive Imperialism in its cultural and political milieu; third to find its roots in the greater history of the British Empire; and finally, to understand why Alfred Milner failed to convince the Empire to embrace Constructive Imperialism. In order to reach its defined objectives, this article examines Alfred Milner’s Constructive Imperialism from a historical standpoint and then utilizes the Contrapuntal Analysis of Edward Said to further investigate its narrative.

**Keywords:** Alfred Milner, Edward Said, Constructive Imperialism, Contrapuntal Analysis, Imperial consciousness, The British Empire.

## 1. Introduction

Born on March 23, 1854, Alfred Milner was a prominent imperialist, politician, statesman and colonial administrator. He played a significant role in the formation of the domestic and foreign policies of the Empire from 1890s until his death in May 13, 1925. His most important political positions in chronological order were Undersecretary of Finance in Egypt (1889-1892), High Commissioner and Governor in different parts of South Africa (1897-1905), Secretary of State for War in David Lloyd George's War Cabinet (1918-1919) and Secretary of State for Colonies (1919-1921). Similar to a good number of imperialists of the period he completed his education at Balliol College, Oxford. His most important legacy is the role he played during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), which directly resulted in the creation of the apartheid in South Africa.

Elevated to the peerage of Baron Milner of St. James and Cape Town in 1901, he chose "Communis Patria" for his motto (Thompson, 2007). The phrase more or less translates to "patriotism for our nation". The motto reflected his firm belief in the formation of a new Anglo-Saxon Empire. He considered himself an "Anglo-Saxon race patriot" and his entire political career was based on this idea. *Constructive Imperialism* was the name of a book he published in 1908. The book was comprised of a series of speeches he gave in support of the "Unionist Party", a branch of the Conservative Party. This Party advocated the reformation of the Empire's economy based on tariff reforms and reorganization of its supposed informal political structure into a formal federation. These reformations in turn were based on a series of cultural and in certain cases utopian beliefs held by Milner and his followers. Foremost amongst these beliefs were the ideals of Britishness, race patriotism, superiority of British laws and

Britain's imperial destiny to spread these laws amongst other nations. What Milner meant by "Constructive Imperialism" is a matter of debate. He believed that only the Empire was capable of executing "constructive policies" throughout the Isles and the world (Milner, 1913). It is probable that he used these two phrases because he saw the Empire as a force for good and its continuation necessary for human progress. Milner enjoyed the support of several prominent Liberals throughout his life, including David Lloyd George<sup>1</sup> and Archibald Primrose.<sup>2</sup> However, the majority of his supporters came from the Conservative Party. The most well-known Conservative supporters of Milner were Evelyn Baring<sup>3</sup>, Joseph Chamberlain<sup>4</sup> and George Nathaniel Curzon.<sup>5</sup> He also enjoyed the backing of some of the most powerful and wealthy families of Britain, including the Cecil Dynasty and the Rothschild Dynasty<sup>6</sup> (Thompson, 2007).

Milner's brand of imperialism was shaped by the economic and political developments of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was the age of New Imperialism. The scramble for colonies, markets and resources was at a record high. As the dominant imperial power, Britain was on a declining curve. Milner saw his brand of imperialism as the only way forward. He considered himself a "civilian soldier of the Empire" and believed that it was necessary to infuse the Anglo-Saxon masses with the same imperial ideology (Milner, 1913, p. 2). According to Milner, the question of

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1. Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922.

2. Prime Minister from 1894-1895.

3. Consul-General of Egypt from 1883 to 1907.

4. Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1895 to 1903.

5. Viceroy and Governor-General of India from 1899 to 1905.

6. Each of the names mentioned above held several minor and major offices.

This article only mentions their most important political positions.

reforming and reorganizing the Empire was first and foremost a cultural matter. He was of the opinion that the Anglo-Saxon race, especially the people of Britain, lacked imperial consciousness and as a result, were uninterested in the fate of the Empire. Milner thought that the British “had conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind” (Seeley, 1883, p. 8). According to this statement the formation of the Empire was not the result of a purposeful and coherent plan on the part of the Anglo-Saxon race. An imperial consciousness did not exist in the British cultural and political psyche. As such, the evolution of the Empire was haphazard and its economic and political structure informal and loose.<sup>1</sup> Milner believed that possessing an overseas empire did not entail a widespread imperial mindset. Although events in the Empire frequently caused popular fervor at home, these were just lamentable chauvinistic anomalies and not the signs of a collective imperial mentality (Darwin, 1999).

The lack of an imperial mentality was not necessarily a regrettable development. According to Milner’s contemporaries, it was one of the exemplary virtues of the British culture. They maintained that Britain, unlike its Continental rivals, did not covet the lands of other nations. Its colonies were beneficial to both colonists and natives. Furthermore, the Empire did not directly rule these colonies. The Dominions<sup>2</sup> were self-governing political

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1. John Robert Seeley’s *Expansion of England* was one of the most popular historical books of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially amongst Imperialists of the time. It greatly influenced Milner’s perception of the British Empire’s history. It remains one of the most influential books on the history of the Empire to this day.
  2. The self-governing white colonies were known as Dominions. These included Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. The non-white, non-Dominion lands and their native inhabitants which were directly ruled by the British were known as the Dependent Empire.

entities and their relationship with the mother nation was based on homogenous cultural and political identities and not the imposition of metropolitan authority. As for the Dependent Empire and their peoples, they were ruled by the British because they were not yet ready for the responsibilities of self-government. But under the tutelage of the British, they too would gradually achieve Dominionhood<sup>1</sup> (Lugard, 1922). The fact that native societies resisted the British Empire since its inception and rejected the civilizing mission was a mere technicality few imperialists were interested in.

Yet, the needs of the time called for a novel approach towards the Empire. For Milner, the absence of an imperial mindset amongst the Anglo-Saxon race and the informal structure of the Empire were major obstacles in its long-term survival. In a world embroiled in numerous economic and political crises fueled by the cultural and national identities of the contending parties, the absence of a unifying imperial identity and a formal political structure were no longer virtues or points of pride; they were lethal weaknesses that would eventually lead to the destruction of the Empire (Offer, 1999). Across the Empire, especially in Britain and the Dominions, awareness of these challenges became manifest in major discussions concerning the future of the Empire. In Britain and the Dominions, there was a growing sense of urgency that neither could survive without the other. The ideas of imperial unity, defense and economy enjoyed a steadily increasing appeal (Killingray, 1999). Milner believed that he could capitalize on these developments and advance the interests of Constructive

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1. The idea of “the civilizing mission” has been extensively analyzed by the majority of postcolonial theorists. The limited scope of this article does not allow for further investigation.

Imperialism. Accordingly, a new approach towards the Empire was needed to save it from external threats and internal disunity. Milner (1913, p. 376) argued that “the time [had come] ...when the United Kingdom alone [would] be hard put to retain its place amongst the foremost nations of the world” and that in order to avoid disaster, the Anglo-Saxon race had to learn “to think Imperially” (Green, 1999, p. 353). Thus, he depicted the Empire as an informal political entity, which had the potential to take a “genuinely imperial form” (Green, 1999, p. 350). However, it needed a unifying cultural identity and an active will on the part of the Anglo-Saxon race. These in turn would result in the birth of a new Anglo-Saxon Empire with a formal economic and political structure.

As to why Milner and his followers were oblivious to the ever-present imperial institutions of their culture is a question that this article attempts to answer. Edward Said (1994, p. 107) believed that this development was in and of itself a narrative that formed part of the imperial discourse:

But by the end of the nineteenth century, high or official culture still managed to escape scrutiny for its role in shaping the imperial dynamic and was mysteriously exempted from analysis whenever the causes, benefits, or evils of imperialism were discussed, as they were almost obsessively...culture participates in imperialism yet is somehow excused for its role. Seeley deploys a language whose imagery of growth, fertility, and expansion, whose teleological structure of property and identity, whose ideological discrimination...had already matured elsewhere...in fiction, political science, racial theory, travel writing.

## 2. The Economic and Political Background of Milner's Constructive Imperialism

As mentioned above, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the age of Pax Britannica<sup>1</sup> was at its end and the Empire was facing numerous trials and tribulations. To Milner, for all intents and purposes, the Empire was at its death throes. It had made a bid for mastery of the world in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and achieved its climax in 1815. The Empire had enjoyed unchallenged economic, cultural and political preeminence for more than half a century. But since the 1880s, two new factors were undermining the British power at an astonishing rate. The first was the ascendancy of Germany and the United States of America and the second was the rising nationalism across the Empire (Fieldhouse, 1999).

The most pressing external issues were the rise of Germany on Continental Europe and the United States in North America. Under the leadership of Otto Von Bismarck<sup>2</sup> Germany had managed to have a relatively peaceful coexistence with the Empire. However, the Wilhelmine Germany wanted a place in the sun (Wilhelm II, 1901)<sup>3</sup> and from the 1890s followed a policy of colonial expansion into Africa, the Middle East and South-East Asia. This event naturally unnerved the Empire. The speed and extent of Germany's commercial and industrial growth was such that by 1914 its economy was three to four times larger than the Middle Powers<sup>4</sup>

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1. Pax Britannica or "the Age of British Peace" denotes the years between 1815 (the battle of Waterloo) and 1899 (the start of the second Boer War), during which, under the British global hegemony, the world was in relative peace.

2. Chancellor of Germany from 1871 to 1890.

3. "In spite of the fact that we have no such fleet as we should have, we have conquered for ourselves a place in the sun" (Wilhelm II's speech in Hamburg, 18 June 1901).

4. The phrase "Middle Powers" denotes Austria-Hungry, Italy and Japan.

combined. It had surpassed both France and Russia and was on its way to outclass the Empire as well. The Germany of 1914 was no longer a loose collection of insignificant semi-independent states. It was the most powerful nation on Continental Europe and was still growing. Its foreign-trade figures tripled between 1890 to 1914 and its merchant fleet was only second to the Empire. German naval growth was deeply unsettling for the British. The safety of the Isles was dependent on the British mastery of the seas and the British naval supremacy had always been a point of pride for the Empire. But even in this area, the British were challenged by the new powers. They had always maintained that in addition to technological supremacy, their navy had to be larger and stronger than the navies of the next two superpowers combined.<sup>1</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British could no longer keep up with this policy. The combined navies of any of the two major superpowers (Austria-Hungry, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Russia and the United States of America) could challenge the British naval dominance (Kennedy, 1987).

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the United States had become a thorn in the flesh of the Empire. It had managed to rise from the ashes of the Civil war.<sup>2</sup> Its Borders touched the Atlantic and the Pacific. This continental-sized nation with its ninety-million strong population was under the authority of a powerful government. Its army was a constant threat to the safety of Canada and the Atlantic Colonies. On the economic front, U.S. mega corporations and industries were rapidly eroding British markets across the globe, including in the Empire itself.<sup>3</sup> By 1914, the age

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1. This policy was called “the two-power standard”.

2. 1861 to 1865.

3. The United States of America had already replaced Great Britain as Canada’s largest economic partner.



of Europe's ascendancy was at its end and the United States of America was already the most important industrial power-house of the world. It massively outclassed and outperformed the entire Continent of Europe. It was the largest producer of coal, oil, pig-iron and steel. It created and consumed more electricity than all of Europe. When it came to the production and possession of modern vehicles it was in a class of its own. Contemporary economic historians have argued that U.S. economy would have overtaken Europe in 1926. The outbreak of the First World War accelerated this eventuality by six years to 1919 (Kennedy, 1987).

For the Empire, the main internal problem was the rising nationalism and separatism in both the Dependent Empire and the Dominions. This was especially true in Ireland and South Africa where the Empire was facing the full-frontal antagonism of the Southern Irish and the Boers (Jackson, 2004). The white population of the Dominions considered themselves partners of the mother nation and the Empire's prosperity and security vital to their own. But this did not mean that in the future, they were not going to leave the Empire and seek independence. The Dominions' bond with the Empire was strong and British chauvinism was rampant in all of them. Yet, they wanted a greater share in the imperial administration and equal status with the metropolis (Martin, 1999).

The situation was far worse in the Dependent Empire. The Empire promised peace and prosperity, but opened native societies to metropolitan influence through force. For three centuries, the natives saw their brothers and sisters murdered, their lands raped and their wealth plundered. Millions of native Africans had been enslaved and shipped across the globe to satiate the unending hunger of British markets. Millions of native Americans had lost their lives to British colonists. Native Asians had been conquered and laid low through gun-boat diplomacy, their modes of substance

destroyed, their societies stratified and their youth enthralled to opium. The grand cities of the Anglo-Saxon race from which the light of “civilization” rayed were built with the blood and sweat of the natives. For these reasons, native resistance had plagued the Empire since its inception. The British violently suppressed native rebellions, but their numbers had dramatically increased since the 1850s. These rebellions were different from their early predecessors in one significant aspect; Their leaders and organizers did not wish to simply oust the British. They had strong nationalist tendencies and often aspired to form their own nations in imitation of the modern European nation-states.<sup>1</sup> These revolts took place across the Empire and significantly strained its resources (Washbrook, 1999). With every nationalist uprising or native rebellion, the idea of a new Empire loomed greater in Milner’s mind. The Empire either had to change or end.

Milner and his followers were extremely frightened of the Empire’s economic decline and the internal struggles resulting from the Dependent Empire and Dominions seeking independence. Add to this, old animosities with France, the fear of a Russian invasion of India, the quarrel over colonial borders in Africa and the unclear future of the Irish and the Boers; one may see the conditions under which Milner’s Constructive Imperialism came to be. Hence, his attempts to “reform” the Empire into an economic and political whole, his efforts to convince the Empire to abandon the principles of free trade and *Laissez-faire*<sup>2</sup> in favor of imperial

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1. The two well-known examples are the Great Mutiny of 1857 in India and the Urabi Revolt of 1879 in Egypt.
  2. The Empire did not practice free trade and *Laissez-faire* in the Dependent Empire as it considered their economies backward. It simply dumped its products in their markets and forced them to produce the raw materials it required. The Empire’s economy operated on the principles of free trade and *Laissez-faire* only when dealing with metropolitan centers and the Dominions.

markets and his interest in an imperial citizenship, congress, army and navy (Friedberg, 1988). Joseph Chamberlain, one of the most prominent advocates of Milner's brand of imperialism alarmingly declared that the Empire was like a "weary titan, [staggering] under the too vast orb of its fate. Great Britain by itself [was] not strong enough to hold its proper place alongside of the U.S. or Russia and probably not Germany. [It] shall be thrust aside by sheer weight" (Chamberlain, 1902, p. 5 in Kennedy, 1987, p. 229).

While it is true that no Constructive Imperialist, Milner included, could predict the destruction and ruin that would engulf the world in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of them sensed what the future held for the Empire. Intellectuals, journalists, politicians and statesmen of the movement, Milner foremost among them, adopted an attitude of social Darwinism and talked and wrote in terms of race patriotism. The world was seen through national and racial rivalries, of one society against another. The survival of the fittest did not simply rule nature; it also ruled the world of men. The world was divided into declining and rising empires with their respective cultures, languages, races and traditions. The struggle was no longer over regional European issues, nor was it just over markets and resources. For Milner and his followers, it was over the entire world and what was at stake, was the British way of life and the soul of the Empire. Every conflict and political incidence were seen as evidence that only the "strongest" culture and race could survive. Milner's Constructive Imperialism was born into this environment of fear, isolationism and racism. Constructive Imperialism was the British response to the uncertainties of the future (Louis, 1999). Milner and his followers (Chamberlain, 1905, p. 329 in Green, 1999, p. 356) wholeheartedly believed that the only solution was a new Anglo-Saxon empire:

The British Empire [could no longer be] an Empire in the sense in which that term [had] been applied before. The British Colonies [were] no longer Colonies in the sense in which that term was originally applied to them... [They were] sister States in which the mother country by virtue of her age, by virtue of all that [had] been done in the past, [might] claim to be first, but only first among equals.

### **3. The Cultural-Historical Background of Milner's Constructive Imperialism**

Constructive Imperialism came into being in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It evolved for 25 years and like every other cultural-political institution of the period, was changed beyond recognition by the brutalities of the First World War. The period covered by this article is the years between 1889<sup>1</sup> to 1918.<sup>2</sup> In order to better understand the cultural background of the movement and also what Milner meant by imperial consciousness or lack of it, one must go further back in time to the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Milner contended that culture played a marginal role in the continuation and propagation of imperialism. He maintained that the Empire itself rarely changed the cultural practices, day to day lives, languages, religions and traditions of its subjects, both in the metropolis and the peripheries (Mackenzie, 1999). He attributed the inception and perpetuation of the Empire to economic incentives, Intereuropean rivalries and short-term political considerations. He presented public opinion's constant change towards the Empire, the British governments' policy alterations and the supposed absence of a unifying strategy as evidences for the lack of imperial

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1. Milner's first mission to Egypt.

2. The end of the First World War.

consciousness. He could not perceive a continuous imperial process that spanned over three centuries (Grant, 2014). The aim of this article is first to prove that imperialism was part of the British culture and second to prove that Milner's belief in the lack of an imperial consciousness was itself a narrative. This narrative was so deeply imbued within the British cultural and political psyche that it was almost unrecognizable from Milner's, or any other imperialist's, sense of nationalism and patriotism:

[because it was] a slowly built-up picture with [Britain] socially, politically, morally charted and differentiated in immensely fine detail at the center and a series of overseas territories connected to it at the peripheries. The continuity of British imperial policy throughout the nineteenth century [was] in fact a narrative...whose main purpose [was] not to raise more questions, not to disturb or otherwise preoccupy attention, but to keep the empire more or less in place (Said, 1994, p. 74).

For European (Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Russia) and non-European Empires (Japan, the United States of America) it was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that imperialism and nationalism intertwined and metamorphosed into a single cultural and political phenomenon. This was not the case for the British. In Great Britain, the roots of nationalistic imperialism went far deeper and its history longer than any other empire/nation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the British, the juxtaposition of empire and nation began as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Macinnes, 2007). During the reign of Tudor monarchs, England was sometimes called an empire, but always with an emphasis on its independence from foreign powers. The word "empire" called to mind the sovereignty of England rather than its mastery over other nations. When James I chose the name "Britain" or "Great Britain" for his new kingdom, he did so in order to declare the autonomy of the British monarchy and

persuade his subjects throughout the Isles to set aside their local loyalties and embrace the new British identity. Grandiose titles such as “great Brittaines imperial Crowne” or “the Empire of Great Britain” did not have expansionist connotations yet (Canny, 1998, p. 1). Whether the British used it to declare their sovereignty or increase their own internal unity is still a matter of debate amongst historians. What is clear is that on a limited cultural and political level, the British tied their national identity with the idea of empire; far earlier than any other European empire/nation of the period. This phenomenon becomes far more significant when one considers the fact that during the reign of Tudor and Stuart monarchs, the colonization of Ireland was at full swing. The British had already crossed the Atlantic and were one step away from mass-colonizing North America (Armitage, 2009).

By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Britain was a rising economic power. A powerful economy meant a steady increase in the exportation of local products and importation of commodities not produced at home. War with Continental powers had disrupted the traditional systems of trade and limited Britain’s access to Continental markets. Britain had to search for stable markets in other parts of the world. This added another incentive to the idea of colonial expansion in the name of national interest. These factors encouraged Britain to establish its first trading companies and bring the wealth of far-flung societies to its doors, binding British national identity to developments in Africa, North America and South-East Asia (Zahedieh, 1998). During this period, the most remarkable element in the British culture was the evolution of a genuinely national mindset, which increasingly compelled the British to tie their economy and politics to the ideals of governmental, racial and religious superiority. More than any other European nation, the British believed that it was their duty to

extend their form of government through colonization and trade to other parts of the world; that it was their God-given mission to spread the true faith and battle the abominable Popery of the French, Portuguese and Spanish, the false “Muhammadan” religion of the Ottomans and Mughals and the heathenism of the natives (Appleby, 1998).

The Empire accelerated the evolution of industrial and mercantile capitalism. It turned Great Britain into the world's largest creditor and financial clearing-house. The British mastery of international waters, their overseas possessions and vast network of trade routes gave them access to numerous markets and natural resources (Cain & Hopkins, 2016). By 1815, most European colonies either belonged to the British or were under their indirect control and supervision. Through war with European powers, the Empire became even richer and turned into “the super-dominant economy in the world's trading structure” (Kennedy, 1987, p. 139). Even the Empire's greatest rivals were aware of these facts:

Little of this...surprised intelligent early-nineteenth-century observers. Despite [their] own assumptions of grandeur, [the French] obsessed with Britain...with its invulnerability, its maritime dominance, its banks and credit system...and yearned to see it all tumble in the dust. Such feelings of envy and dislike doubtless existed, if in a less extreme form, among the Spaniards, Dutch, and others who saw the British monopolizing the outside world...[British] greatness, prosperity, and wealth [rose] high. [it was the] mistress of the sea and neither in this dominion nor in world trade [did] she [have] a single rival to fear (Kennedy, 1987, p. 139).

In spite of having no economic and political rivals for the foreseeable future, the Empire continued to grow. By 1815, apart

from the periodic alarm about French movements in Africa and the Pacific or Russian maneuvers in Central Asia or the Middle East, no major threats remained. Between 1815 and 1887, the British Empire existed in an economic and political power vacuum. There were limits to the British imperialism, but in general colonists, explorers, missionaries, planters and traders carrying out British interests, encountered no resistance other than native societies. Outgunned and outnumbered, native societies did not surrender. They endured the British onslaught to the point of total annihilation. In a matter of decades, the British systematically destroyed entire cultures, languages, religions and traditions that had evolved for millennia. From 1815 to 1865, 25 years before the events of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the decline of British fortunes, the Empire grew at an astonishing annual rate of 265000 square kilometers.<sup>1</sup> Many of these acquisitions not only did not have any economic and political values, but also were significant burdens. This fact alone should prove that for the British, the Empire and its growth went beyond economic and political considerations. Even the most economic-political oriented texts of the period were filled with triumphalist arguments and race-patriotic propaganda:

The plains of North America and Russia are our corn fields; Chicago and Odessa our granaries; Canada and the Baltic are our timber forests; Australasia contains our sheep farms, and in Argentina and on the western prairies of North America are our herds of oxen; Peru sends her silver, and the gold of South Africa and Australia flows to London; the Hindus and the Chinese grow tea for us, and our coffee, sugar and spice plantations are in all the Indies. Spain and France are our vineyards and the Mediterranean our fruit garden; and our cotton grounds, which for long have occupied the Southern

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1. Great Britain itself is 242000 square kilometers.



United States, are now being extended everywhere in the warm regions of the earth (Jevons, 1865, p. 151).

A simple analysis of the above quotation reveals the deep roots of national and racial prejudice in the British mindset and culture. The fact that every one of these activities was carried out by indentured or slave labor and at the expense of the native population did not bother Milner. It was this veneration of the British culture and race that detached the Empire from these sordid affairs. Colonialism, racial oppression and imperial subjugation were sanctioned by the British culture. Economic and political considerations simply acted as catalysts (Said, 1978).

Despite close familiarity with the British history and being a shrewd politician, Milner did not realize or simply refused to understand that no nation, no matter how economically and politically stable and well-organized, could sustain prolonged policies and strategies towards any issue, let alone a global empire. In the case of a global empire, the matter becomes far more complex and any attempt for a stable political process would not only be impossible in the first place, but also undesirable. External rivalry with other powers, internal conflicts and resistance of subjugated nations require economic and political flexibility. It does not allow for the rigidness of a unified imperial strategy. Creating three-centuries-long plans is impossible due to the malleability of human societies on economic and political levels. But culture works on a grander scale and over long periods of time, even centuries. It can sustain imperial notions for extremely protracted durations and give rise to actual empires when the economic and political conditions are ripe (Kennedy, 1987). It goes without saying that the British did not plan or set out from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to create their world encompassing empire. But their

culture did have the seeds and necessary ideological tools to do so. As time went on and the fortunes of the British on economic and political levels rose and those of their European rivals declined, these seeds of cultural imperialism burst into fully fledged institutions that encouraged and promoted the acquisition of vast swaths of lands, markets, natives and resources. The imperialism of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century was very different from the imperialism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet both were instances of imperialism nonetheless, sustained by the same culture (Said, 1978).

According to this culture, all power was British national power and British national power meant good government and liberty for both the British and the natives. Establishing monopolies, forceful conversion of the natives, planting colonies in Africa and America, setting up trade routes and settling Protestants in Catholic Ireland were all instances of the British spread of “freedom” and “good government”. For Milner, these goals did not clash with one another. Economic stability and commercial growth at the expense of native markets, the creation of colonies and acquisition of new lands through force, the spread of true religion and godliness at gun point, political order and responsible government through gun-boat diplomacy became one and the same, not just for the British who were the beneficiaries of the Empire, but also for the natives who suffered its cruelties (Strong, 2007). Milner simply did not see, or bother to see, these acts as conflicts of interest.

From the reign of Queen Elizabeth I to Milner’s first mission to Egypt in 1889, the process of empire-building was slow, yet always steady and strong. Beyond this massive machinery of colonization, finance, trade and war were means of a solid cultural hegemony that nurtured the Empire. For Milner, the idea of Empire was closely knitted to his nationality, beyond the point of recognition (Thompson, 2007). According to Milner, the Empire not only

protected the metropolitan interests, but also that of the subjugated nations. Furthermore, Imperialism meant economic, political and social freedom for all of its citizens. For Milner “the power of [British] laws and [British] principles of government [was] not merely a [British] question – its continuance [was] essential to the freedom of mankind” (Dilke, 1894, p. 546). This unshakable faith in the genius of the British race to govern itself and others was the foundation of Milner’s brand of imperialism. Yet it was a foundation based on wrong assumptions. It was a powerful cultural narrative. Milner’s failure or refusal to see it as such, simply undermined his efforts for the creation of a new empire.

#### **4. The Contrapuntal Analysis of Milner’s Constructive Imperialism**

Despite its ever-increasing presence, there remained the widespread belief amongst Milner and his followers that the Anglo-Saxon race was indifferent towards the Empire. They stated that “we think of Great Britain too much and of Greater Britain too little” (Seeley, 1883, p. 51). The Anglo-Saxon race had to reexamine its relationship with the Empire. According to Milner, an anomalous economic system and a defective political structure were the results of this lack of imperial consciousness. This problem was not exclusive to the Isles. People from other parts of the Empire were also reluctant to accept their duties towards the Empire. As how far imperialism had to expand before Milner could realize its formal political structure or recognize its tightly-knit relationship with the British culture is a matter of debate. As argued above, the historical roots of imperialism in the British national identity may have played a significant role in his refusal to accept the reality. Yet, the fact remains that his failure to discern the true nature of events directly contributed to the failure of his brand of imperialism.

Milner continued to spearhead the cause of imperial consciousness and race patriotism as the salvation of the Empire. From 1889 to the eve of the First World War, Milner's political weight increased exponentially. While internal problems and international considerations changed his economic and political views, they did not change his perspective about imperial consciousness and race patriotism. He described the importance of these concepts as follows:

[Our] patriotism knows no geographical, but only racial limits. [We are] imperialist[s] and British race patriots. It is not the soil of England, dear as it is to [us], but the speech, the tradition, the spiritual heritage, the principles, the aspirations of the British race...they do not cease to be [ours] because they are transplanted. We are told there is no such thing as citizenship of the Empire. In the purely juridical sense that may be true. It is only a question of time when the expansion of the race will compel a new juridical conception, that of a common citizenship of all the countries which that race inhabits or controls. The wider patriotism is no mere exalted sentiment, it is a practical necessity. This brings us to our first great principle: follow the race. The British state must follow the race...wherever it settles in appreciable numbers as an independent community. We cannot afford to part with so much of our best blood. In another twenty years it is reasonable to hope ...that all Britons, alike in the motherland or overseas, will be imperialists (Milner, 1925, p. 5 in Thompson, 2007, p. 6).

Milner and his followers pushed for these agendas not only in Imperial Conferences, but also across the Empire. As mentioned above, his was one the most influential brands of imperialism in the metropolis. As most of Constructive Imperialists were either graduates of Cambridge and Oxford or members of these Universities' faculties, Milner included, they had significant sway

in the schools and universities of the Empire. Since they had a great number of journalists and writers in their midst, they were familiar with the potency of public opinion.<sup>1</sup> But most importantly, since Constructive Imperialists were economic, industrial and political influencers, they dominated the economic and political discourse of the Empire (Thompson, 2007).

While on the cultural level, these agendas seemed confusing and resembled quasi-romantic and utopian racialism, on the economic and political level they were divided into two categories of internalization of the economy and federalization of the Empire. Internalization of the economy meant that the Empire would set aside the ideals of Laissez-faire and liberal capitalism and adopt protectionism and tariff reforms. Milner maintained that these changes would ensure that peripheries sell their raw materials to the metropolis and the metropolitan producers sell their final products to the peripheries.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, tariff reforms would make it difficult for non-imperial products to find any market within the Empire. Milner believed that these economic “reforms” would immortalize the Empire (Milner, 1908).

Milner vied for the federalization of the Empire and the formation of an imperial congress, comprised of the Dominions and the metropolis. He maintained that federalization would stop the progress of nationalism in the white settlements and prevent another revolution like the secession of the Thirteen Colonies in 1776. The numerous Colonial and Imperial Conferences were to be

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1. The British War Cabinet of the First World War, having a number Constructive Imperialist ministers, ran an extremely successful anti-German propaganda campaign across the World.
  2. Subpar British products could not compete with the superior American and German products outside of the Empire.

the first step towards the realization of an imperial congress. He contended that concurrent with the pursuit of these two goals, Constructive Imperialists had to further infuse the Anglo-Saxon race with an imperial consciousness and ideals of race patriotism.

Here the most important question this article strives to answer is why despite his considerable economic and political power, Milner failed to spread his brand of imperialism? According to Edward Said (1994, p. 66) in order to properly utilize Contrapuntal Analysis, the critic must “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented”. As such, this article attempts to shed light not only on the Constructive Imperialist narrative itself, but also on the marginal narratives it tried to either ignore or conceal. Milner thought that the strength of the Empire came from the remarkable capabilities of the Anglo-Saxon race for good government. He argued that only a new empire comprised of the Anglo-Saxon nations (Britain and its Dominions) could survive and prosper. He believed that the myriad of native societies that lived in the Empire were nothing but burdens that wasted its resources. For these reasons he excluded the native societies from his brand of imperialism. He pushed for a narrative which misrepresented these disenfranchised groups.

Instead, this article argues that the native societies that Milner considered burdens and weaknesses were in fact the groups that gave the Empire strength and kept it together. By deliberately barring these disenfranchised groups from acquiring equal rights and status with whites, Milner and his followers forced them to actively seek independence. In other words, Milner and his followers severed the Empire from its source of economic and political strength. Milner’s movement was built upon wrong assumptions. Regardless of the immorality of the imperial process,

not representing or misrepresenting these groups was the gravest disservice Milner committed against his own cause. Rather than using his energy and resources to reconcile the native societies with the Empire, he wasted his assets and time on strengthening the racial narratives of the Dominions who were partners of the metropolis in the imperial process.

According to Edward Said the British culture venerated the Empire to a point where no imperialist could see the relationship between the imperial discourse and cruel practices such as slavery, racial subjugation and oppression; that the idea of a racially inclusive imperial discourse was oxymoronic (1994). The only way for Milner to spread his brand of imperialism was to devise such a discourse or at least something akin to it. Yet, he did the very opposite. As established above, the British culture already had powerful imperial institutions that penetrated every echelon of the British society, even those groups of people whom historians and post-colonial theorists alike consider victims of the Empire.

The Dominions' seeking independence was one of Milner's greatest fears. These were the Anglo-Saxon nations the metropolis considered civilized and capable of self-government. There was a good chance the metropolis would accept their independence. Yet, all were vital participants in the imperial process. Long before the events of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, these colonies had become politically self-sufficient but remained part of the Empire. A significant number of officers and soldiers who served in the imperial armed forces and conquered the lands of other nations and subdued their populace were from the Dominions, including Ireland and South Africa. A great number of British individuals that served in India, the largest non-Dominion colony, were from the Dominions. Dominion companies participated in and made

profits from the imperial commerce and economy including slavery. Many authors and journalists who wrote extensive treatises in support of the Empire were born in the Dominions. The colonists who settled in the Dominions did not hesitate to invoke their British racial superiority to seize the lands of the natives or enslave them. They frequently used the language of race patriotism to ask for the support of the metropolis, and they received metropolitan support. Not only did they enjoy extensive freedoms under the British Common law, but they also benefited from the protection of the imperial army and navy (Marshall, 1998).

Similarly, all progressive movements, which have been depicted by modern and postmodern schools of criticism as opponents of imperialism, such as women's and workers' movements, supported the Empire. Women's movements created a great number of institutions which were active across the Empire.<sup>1</sup> Workers' movements were one of the most avid backers of Constructive Imperialist policies (Milner, 1908). What Milner dubbed "constructive policies" included a significant number of socialist programs that garnered considerable support from the Empire's socialists. Edward Said (1994, p. 53) also attests to this fact:

It is perhaps embarrassing that sectors of the metropolitan cultures that have since become vanguards in the social contests of our time were uncomplaining members of this imperial consensus. With few exceptions, the women's as well as the working-class movement was pro-empire.

The influence of the Empire was not limited to Britain or the Dominions. With few exceptions, the upper-classes of native societies supported the Empire (Bayly, 1999). The number of metropolitan items, which the higher echelons of the Dependent

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1. Like Victoria League which was founded in 1901.



Empire absorbed, was truly amazing. From every day goods such as cloth and kitchenware, to high-cultural products like novels and belle-letters were imported and used in copious amounts. They utilized these items not because they needed them. Their fellow native craftsmen provided similar products. They purchased these items because they wanted to imitate metropolitan fashions and trends. They studied and emulated British mannerisms as the model for correct social behavior. They learnt the English language not just because it was their country's official language, but also because they considered it a superior mode of communication. Their children went to modern schools and universities in order to enter the imperial administration. The native elite adapted a sense of Britishness suited to local circumstances (Bayly, 1999). They functioned as intermediaries between the Empire and the lower classes. Essential to this sense of Britishness was the idea of citizenship of the Empire, one of the most important tenants of Milner's Constructive Imperialism. On every occasion, when the colonial administration and the natives reached an impasse and the issue was relegated to the metropolis, these natives introduced themselves as citizens of the Empire and subjects of the Crown. One might argue that they had no choice since they faced an overwhelming force, which they could not defeat. But the truth is that many native elites held that under the correct conditions in which they could enjoy similar rights as those enjoyed by whites, they would remain part of the Empire. It was the realization that they could never have equal rights with whites that convinced them to rebel and push for independence. To conclude, the citizens of Britain, the Dominions and upper echelons of the Dependent Empire were already imperially conscious; with few exceptions, none were actively seeking independence.

However, the largest portion of the Empire's population did not

live in Britain or the Dominions. Nor were they from the elite sections of the Dependent Empire. They were the lower and middle classes of the native population.<sup>1</sup> These groups were the silent and unwilling partners of the Empire. Their toil maintained the imperial machinery, which provided Milner and his followers with the opportunity to spread the cause of Constructive Imperialism. Yet, to Milner, only their subjugation and usefulness were important: “The complete subjugation of the black [is] a fait accompli and he is a useful animal” (Butler, 1964, p. 243 in Thompson, 2007, p. 73). Setting aside the offensive language and deep-seated racism, this sentence proves how banal the barbaric conditions under which the natives suffered had become and how worthless their lives were to the likes of Milner. These “animals” were the cornerstones of the Empire Milner held so dear. Yet, they had no place in the future he envisioned because unlike the Anglo-Saxon race, they had no God-given talent for good government. They were not humans, but beasts of burden. They were still “dependent” on the Anglo-Saxon race for good-government and their service was a debt to be paid. While Milner focused his energy and time on the already imperially conscious people of Britain and its Dominions, the native societies of Africa, Asia and Oceania continued to suffer the most pernicious practices of the British. The roots of this authoritarianism could be found in the British culture. While the pattern of representative government that developed in Britain spread to Australia, New Zealand, North America and South Africa, an empire of rule by force spread to India, South-East Asia and most of Africa. While Dominions and the Isles enjoyed the fruits of the Empire, it was the native populations that kept it together. Their raw materials fueled its declining industries. Their markets siphoned in British products

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1. the native population of the Empire in India and South East Asia, was several times larger than the rest of the Empire combined.

that no-one else would buy. Their educated population gathered taxes, held low offices and manned courthouses. It was the native labor force that served the machinery of the Empire. It was the native soldiers that protected its borders and fought in its wars. Yet, the Dependent Empire and its population held little interest to Milner. Although he was aware of the extremely vital role they played in the maintenance of the Empire, he dreamt of the day he could create a united Empire from the Dominions, the Isles and the white settlements. He still argued that the Empire “incorporate[ed] alien races without trying to disintegrate them, or rob them of their individuality...[and] open[ed] [for them] new vistas of culture and advancement” (Milner, 1913, p. 38). He also claimed that:

[The British could] only fraternize with those with whom [they had] something in common, morally or spiritually speaking...in other words a community of race, language, civilization, history, tradition and ideals which form[d] the basis of the link between Great Britain and the Dominions (Halperin, 1952, p. 18 in Thompson, 2007, p. 4).

Dismissing the Dependent Empire as a cultural, economic and political liability was a gross miscalculation on the part of Milner. The irony was lost on Milner that the so-called Dependent Empire had no use for the British. Yet, the Empire on which the sun never set could not survive without its Dependencies. Milner's actions and words proved to the natives that the Anglo-Saxon race was incapable of change and peaceful coexistence even within the borders of its own Empire. For the Dependent Empire, civil disobedience and military resistance were the only options for a better future.

The ideology of absolutism governed the Dependent Empire. This was an empire of rule over hundreds of millions of people.

British governors with a small number of army officers and officials administered the Dependent Empire without any representative institutions or formal consent. The British equality and liberty could not be extended to the Dependent Empire because they were not of the Anglo-Saxon race. The natives had to be ruled through strong government powers because allegedly they only understood the language of power. This mode of thinking was not even questioned by Milner.

Predictably, the more the Empire imposed itself on the native societies and changed their way of life, the more it instigated insurgencies and revolutions. Whether this was in the form of local unrest towards distortions of their traditions and modes of subsistence or major movements driving for national self-determination, the outcome was increasing opposition towards the British rule and further strain upon imperial resources. Milner did not see these oppositions as signs that the Dependent Empire should be incorporated into his Constructive Imperialism. He considered these insurrections as further evidence that the natives could never be equal to the British, and as a result could not be part of the new Empire. This phenomenon occurred at a time when the Empire was over-stretched. It was being crushed under its own massive economic and political weight. When it came to the interests and rights of the natives against the interests and rights of the colonists, Milner never hesitated to sacrifice the former to save the latter. The interests and rights of the natives was supposedly one of the major reasons he went to war against the Boers. Yet, during the peace negotiations, he readily set aside the native interests and rights in order to appease the Boers. This decision reverberated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. South Africa was the last nation on earth to abolish black/white segregation.<sup>1</sup> It was the

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1. Israel remains the only state that enforces racial segregation.

native population of South Africa that suffered decade after decade from the apartheid that Milner helped create.

Despite his continuous and incessant arguments about an economic and political new Empire, Milner's brand of imperialism was part of the age-old imperial discourse wrapped in new utopian words. While it was more subtle in its approach towards the Dominions, its explicit veneration of Britishness and race patriotism further alienated the Dependent Empire. The economic, political and religious factors that greatly encouraged the British to set out for the Atlantic in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, closely resembled those that formed the core of Milner's brand of imperialism. Rivalry with France, Portugal and Spain was replaced with rivalry with Germany, Japan and U.S.A. Hatred towards the natives of North America and Atlantic Colonies was replaced with the deliberate exclusion of the natives of Africa and Asia from the new Empire. Milner's Constructive Imperialist agenda, enumerated in his numerous books, newspaper articles and speeches attested to these facts. Concerning the Empire's western rivals, he said, "my flesh does not creep at the sight of a German waiter. I have no reason to suppose that Germany is deliberately meditating an attack upon us. But then I don't need any definite shock to make me uneasy...all that I know is that...we are bound sooner or late to come to grief" (Milner, 1913, p. 365). About the Empire's the native population he argued:

an Oriental want[s] to be a master or to have a master. [He is] prepared to be your humble, obedient servant, or...prepared, quite prepared, to do without you. But [he doesn't] understand divided responsibility or limited freedom of action. This tendency is an excellent illustration of the difficulty which an Oriental finds in distinguishing between subordination and servitude (Milner, 1902, p. 33).

What made the case of Milner different from other imperialists was his unwillingness to either acknowledge the Empire as a formal political entity or recognize the imperial aspects of the British culture. The view that the Empire was not “a political fact, but only a phrase, an influence, or a sentiment” (Hamilton, 1906, p. 481 in Burroughs, 1999, p. 171) or that the Empire did not have “any permanent binding force or rational system” (Milner, 1902, p. 288 in Burroughs, 1999, p. 171) affirmed the long-held Constrictive Imperialist view that the British culture did not have any imperialist aspect. But the fact remained that colonization and empire-building were as much a result of economic and political change, as of the cultural imperialism of the British. Economic and political incentives, no matter how powerful, could not have sustained the British Empire for so long had they not enjoyed the support of cultural, religious and social institutions of Britain. Seeley’s opening words, in which Milner firmly believed, were at the same time a reluctant acceptance of the Empire and the dismissal of its formal structure. Edward Said (1994, p. 9) recognized this notion and argued:

As for the curious but perhaps allowable idea propagated...by J. R. Seeley that some of [Britain’s] overseas empire was originally acquired absentmindedly, it [did] not by any stretch of the imagination account for [its] consistency, persistence, and systematized acquisition and administration, let alone [its] augmented rule and sheer presence.

Ironically, the very reforms, which Milner was eager to enact in order to keep the Empire intact, were the acts that undermined its economic and political structure; en-masse conscription and militarization in place of individual freedoms, forceful and widespread military industrialization in place of growth of civilian industries, protectionism in place of laissez-faire and free trade,

race patriotism and cultural-highhandedness in place of cultural inclusivity, short-term political considerations in place of long-term policies that would placate the grievances of the Dependent Empire. Each of these policies was a step towards the inevitable liquidation of the Empire. Add to this the outbreak of the First World War and one can clearly see why Milner's Constructive Imperialism failed.

The First World War hastened and intensified these biases. Increasing economic exploitation of raw materials, man-power and taxes in the Dependent Empire was the order of the day. This in turn further weakened the already strained links that connected the Dependent Empire with the metropolis. Even the majority of the native elites realized that no matter how much they contributed to the Empire at this critical moment, they could never be accepted as its citizens and equal to the British. By 1919, while Milner celebrated the Empire's victory over the Central Powers and enforced its agenda through League of Nations' mandates, Gandhi was uniting India against the Empire, the African Congress regularly met to discuss the future of an independent Africa and the Al-Wafd Party was active in Egypt (Kennedy, 1987).

## **5. Conclusion**

Alfred Milner was born during the heyday of British imperialism and came of age during its decline. This turn of events was unacceptable to his ilk, who wished to expand the British power to every corner of the Earth, no matter the cost in blood and resources. Theirs was a brand of imperialism, which held the Anglo-Saxondom as a divine race and the Earth its natural birth-right. According to Milner, the Empire was losing its superpower status

not because its rivals had sound economic and political plans, but because the Anglo-Saxon race was not imperially conscious; the Empire suffered from internal struggles not because it had mercilessly exploited the Dependent Empire and dismissed its people as savages, but because the economic and political relationship between the metropolis and its Dominions was haphazard and loose. Milner's Constructive Imperialism was to be the answer to these conundrums. By creating a purely Anglo-Saxon Empire, Milner and his followers would redefine the relationship between the Anglo-Saxon nations and remind them of their God-given duty to rule the Earth and shepherd humanity towards a better future. The Empire's "greatness" came from the administrative genius of the Anglo-Saxon race and not the resources of the Dependent Empire. Native societies were noting but dead weight. Milner would solve "the native question" by excluding them from the new Empire. They would remain economic and political satellites of the Empire, not part of it, nor independent from it.

Milner's wrong assumptions and his failure to discern the Empire's true nature doomed his brand of imperialism. The Anglo-Saxon race was already imperially conscious. The British culture had powerful imperial institutions. The Dominions saw themselves as partners of the metropolis in the propagation of British rule across the globe. Even the most progressive and forward-thinking sections of Anglo-Saxondom supported the Empire. Almost everyone in Britain and the Dominions considered him/herself a citizen of the Empire and serving its high civilizational purpose.

Milner's greatest mistake was his high-handed dismissal of the Dependent Empire. The Dependent Empire was not a dead weight but the true source of the Empire's economic and political strength. Its resources fueled the Empire's industries. Its markets were



dumping grounds for metropolitan products. Its educated populace performed the daily functions of the imperial administration. Native soldiers guarded the Empire's borders. Native societies were the life blood of the Empire and yet suffered the brunt of British brutality. Instead of appeasement and reconciliation, Milner and his fellow Constructive Imperialists took the path of alienation. Racial subjugation and segregation were the order of the day under Constructive Imperialism, as they had been since the inception of the Empire. Contrary to what he and his followers incessantly preached, Milner's Constructive Imperialism was not a new approach towards the Empire. It was the same old imperialism that had caused the death and enslavement of millions of native Africans, Americans and Asians. Milner's sanctimonious attitude towards non-Anglo-Saxon societies, his failure to recognize the Empire's sordid past, and his refusal to reconcile the Empire with the natives, proved that the Empire would never allow native societies any peace, let alone their independence. Separation from the Empire was the only viable option for native societies. Their resistance, along with the outbreak of the First World War, shattered Milner's dream of a new Anglo-Saxon Empire. The Empire could not survive without its most vital regions in any capacity. Constructive Imperialism did not preserve the Empire. It only exacerbated its cultural, economic and political condition.

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