

INTRODUCTION
The Scramble for Africa: From the Conference
at Berlin to the Incident at Fashoda

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MARLOW WAS MEETING with representatives of the Company in Brussels, engaging to pursue their enterprises in Africa, when he observed the colors of that map, colors that had redesigned the map's "blank space," which had been identified by his author in his own childhood. Red marked the spaces claimed by England, blue those of the French, orange those of the Portuguese, and purple those of the Germans. Much of this kaleidoscopic design had been drawn by the European participants in the Berlin Conference convened by Bismarck in November 1884 and concluded in February 1885. But the scramble for Africa was not only a variegated collage; it was also a struggle between black and white.

Early in the century, Hegel's *Philosophy of History* had excluded the African continent from all existing historical processes: "Africa proper, as far as History goes back," he wrote in the introduction, "has remained—for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World—shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself—the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (91). The German philosopher concludes his abbreviated discussion of Africa: "What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History" (94). Hegel's displacement of Africa from the world-historical map draws on hues for its outlines and contours to be sure, but imposes on the diagrammatic sketch three other paradigms as well—child/adult, nature/culture, night/day—and instantiates the cultural grounds for a narrative of development that would significantly overdetermine Europe's imperial and imperious relations, as well as the rationales for its territorial claims, with Africa for the next two centuries.

"Civilization, Christianity, and Commerce," according to the legendary missionary David Livingstone, were the bases for the European "mission"

across Africa. And each of those agendas had its respective, if not always respectable, proponents: precipitous explorers, zealous missionaries, and opportunistic traders cum administrators. The English occasionally referred to their empire as a “civilizing mission,” which the French in turn translated as “la mission civilisatrice”: Africa and its African inhabitants had to be taught to “grow up,” to enter “history,” but on European terms. Race then provided an important additional legitimization to that mission, from the scientific theories of Darwin to their revisions into social Darwinism. The imperial project was, in that regard, a white and black one; the other colors on Marlow’s map came from the political and economic competitions among the European powers themselves for control over the resources of the continent. It was, as Conrad maintained, “not a pretty thing when you look[ed] into it too much.” For Conrad, and his spokesperson in the very heart of darkness, “What redeems it is the idea only.”

The “idea,” however, was not necessarily any more coherent—or pretty or redemptive—than the mottled maps: Germans competing with Portuguese, Italians with Belgians, the French against the English, and each against the other—and the African peoples. From the Suez Canal to the Cape of Good Hope, from the Congo River to the Nile, administrators like Rhodes and Lugard, adventurers such as Stanley and Leopold II, soldiers like Gordon and Kitchener, competed in the interests of their national governments in claiming personal status and states’ rights. The General Act of the Conference of Berlin, signed on 26 February 1885, was written to adjudicate such disputes of trade, territory, spheres of influence, and the use of “spirituous liquors,” but the persistent altercations and tendentious ambitions would be fought out repeatedly in the last decades of the imperial century: at Khartoum, at Omdurman, along the Congo River, in the Transvaal. Crises were continuous, but the statesmanly “conference” of Berlin among the European nations might be said to have culminated in the “incident at Fashoda” and the fateful meeting between French career diplomat Jean-Baptiste Marchand and the British General Sir Herbert Horatio Kitchener. It had been Marchand’s plan to proceed east across Africa to confront the British as they moved south from Egypt through the Sudan. If the British, in Rhodes’s formulation, designed to map Africa along the Cape-to-Cairo axis, the French would redraw the lines from the Congo to the Nile, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. But it didn’t happen that way. And the incident at Fashoda, on 19 September 1898, concluded in a capitulation of French claims to British demands. A century later, however, the map of Africa, albeit colored differently following decolonization, remains drawn along much the same (disputed) lines as those determined at the Berlin Conference of 1885.

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