

Late Victorian Scientific Racism and British Civilizing Mission in Pears' Soap Ads

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1. Introduction

The last two decades of the 19th century in Britain were years marked by imperialism and capitalist competitions. Britain was one of the key players in the “scramble for Africa”, an imperialistic rivalry between European countries over vast territories of the African continent. The exploitation of African resources made possible the flourishing of British companies, which consequently lead to the economic rivalry between them and the creation of monopolies over market. The creation of the prestige of a company was aided by a mighty tool which came into existence at roughly the same period: advertising.

One of the products which became immensely popular in the second half of the 19th century was soap. Anne McClintock states that owing to the British exploitation of African land and the forced colonial labor which provided the British with palm oil and palm kernel oil (2000, 131-132), soap was no longer a luxury for upper-classes (Ibid., 25). Now both middle and working classes could afford to buy soap. In the beginning, soap was sold by weight, but with the rising economic competition, it became a branded good in the 1880s widely advertised through popular British press (McClintock 2000, 132; Ramamurthy 2003, 24).

One of the most lucrative advertising campaigns for a soap company in that period was Pears' Soap advertising (Ramamurthy 2003, 26). Pears' Soap was advertised in a threefold fashion: as a beauty product for “a perfect complexion” aimed at middle classes; as a cleaning product for “cleansing the great unwashed” (McClintock 2000, 129), i.e. for educating the poor of Britain about the virtues of cleanliness; and as an imperial British product which has the power to civilize (that is to say – whiten) the “savage” black Africans (Te Hennepe 2014, 15). To emphasize how racially-tuned Pears' advertisements actually were, one must bear in mind that in comparison with any other product advertised in the popular British newspaper *The Graphic*, Pears' Soap released the most images of black people since the 1880s until the First World War (Ramamurthy 2003, 37).

In this paper, I focus on the racist and imperialist messages in Pears' advertisements in the late-Victorian period. Namely, I search for the echoes of the then-flourishing British scientific racism in Pears' advertisements, aiming to show how both the scientific and commodity racism were constructed to justify the British imperialist invasion of Africa by representing it as a "civilizing mission".

I begin by discussing the attention paid to the healthy (white) skin in British public health in the second half of the 19th century and the race and class implications of that. I analyze the racial connotations of healthy white skin on the example of a Pears' Soap commercial featuring a white boy who gives soap to a black boy, which magically turns the black boy white. I then discuss the basic features of late-19th century British scientific racism and the way it was applied to this Pears' Soap ad. In the last chapter, I discuss the so-called British "civilizing mission" defended both by scientific and commodity racism. In this chapter, I analyze two more Pears' Soap advertisements to show how Pears' brand appropriated the scientific discourse of the "civilizing mission" as a justification for imperialism.

2. Skin and health in the mid-19th century Britain

According to Mienieke te Hennepe, after Gilbert Breschet and Augustin Roussel de Vauzème wrote on the anatomy and the role of the sweat glands in 1835, skin began to be seen as an inseparable element of the overall health of the body (2014, 400). Skin was not anymore just a "receptive layer" (Ibid., 399). Rather, it acquired an important physiological function of serving as a tool through which body cleanses itself (Ibid., 399).

The first person in Britain who talked about skin in this new light was dermatologist Erasmus Wilson. In 1845 he published his most famous work, *Healthy Skin*, in which he discussed the importance of keeping skin clean in order to preserve the health of the body (Te Hennepe 2014, 402). Wilson argued both for the importance of individual private hygiene and for sanitary reform for the working classes (Ibid., 403). In later years, following in Wilson's footsteps, British hygienists made analogies between the skin and sewer systems by referring to skin as a "grand drainage pipe of the body", the purpose of which was to cleanse the body of the unwanted waste and dirt (Ibid., 410).

However, in 19th century Britain the idea of healthy skin had additional cultural value attached: healthy skin had to be white skin. Namely, in Victorian Britain, the working classes which lived and worked in unhealthy conditions were at the epicenter of dirt and disease. At the same time,

working classes spent many hours working outside, which made their skin darker (McClintock 2000, 133). Not having dark skin meant not being part of a working class and therefore, not being dirty.

Moreover, dark skin was not only “the visible stigma” of belonging to a working class, it was also a feature of the “uncivilized” and “savage” black race under British imperial rule (McClintock 2000, 133). Therefore, for the middle classes, making one’s skin clean meant keeping one’s skin white, which in turn differentiated them both from the working class laborers and the “inferior” races. As far as the laboring masses were concerned, cleaning their skin not only improved their health, it also brought them closer to the middle-class ideals of cleanliness and it emphasized their own superiority over the “inferior” dark races (Ramamurthy 2003, 31-32). In Victorian Britain, therefore, healthy white skin functioned as a symbolic surface (Te Hennepe 2014, 398) on which both class and racial values were inscribed.

3. Soap as a cleansing tool: Pears’ Soap advertisements

The crucial product used for cleaning one’s skin was, and still is, soap. Therefore, in accordance with the symbolic value of the skin, as McClintock argues, “soap took shape as a technology of social purification, inextricably entwined with the semiotics of imperial racism and class denigration” (2000, 133).

Many of the Pears’ Soap ads explored the symbolic values attached to the skin by emphasizing the connections between washing and being *clean*, and between washing and being *white*. In a linear logic, Pears’ Soap ads aimed to show that to wash was to be clean, to be clean was to be white and to be white was to be civilized. This kind of advertisement worked hand-in-hand with the racist discourse: the soap boxes bore the pictures of black kids being washed white or they portrayed soap as a product that had the potential to civilize the African other. Consequently, Pears’ Soap, as a branded good, became an epitome of “commodity racism” (McClintock 2000, 131). Therefore, the notion of “commodity racism” refers to the phenomenon of spreading of racist messages through commodity advertisement.

One of the most famous racist Pears’ Soap advertisements (fig. 1) represents a black boy becoming white thanks to Pears’ Soap’s “magic”. The advertisement, which appeared in *The Graphic* in 1884, consists of two images: in the first one, the white boy gives a bar of Pears’ Soap to a black boy who is sitting in a bathtub. The second image reveals that, after washing, the black boy has a black face, but a white body. He joyfully looks at himself

in the mirror presented by the white boy and apparently admires the change in the color of his body which Pears' Soap produced.

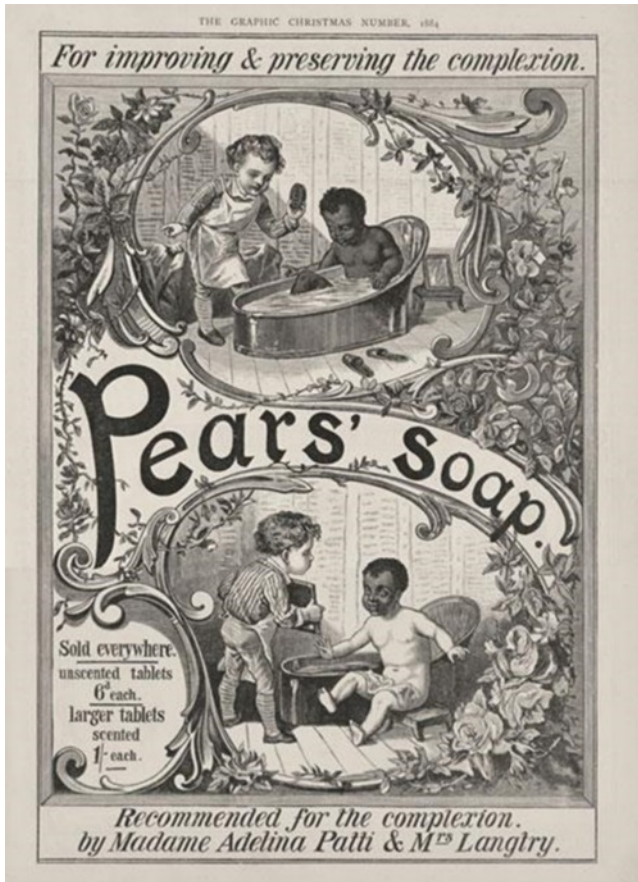


Figure 1: Pears' Soap ad in *The Graphic*, Christmas Number, 1884

At the top of the advertisement a caption says: "For improving and preserving the complexion". This advertisement has been analyzed thoroughly both by Anne McClintock (2000) and Anandi Ramamurthy (2003). Since making your skin white was synonymous with being civilized, both McClintock and

Ramamurthy argue that making the black boy white functions as the representation of the British “civilizing mission” (Ramamurthy 2003, 26, McClintock 2000, 134), in which soap is featured as a product which whitens, i.e. civilizes, the racial Other (McClintock 2000, 134). As Ramamurthy says, through the representation of the black child as “desiring to be white and in effect accepting its inferiority”, Pears’ Soap ad justifies British imperialism (2003, 31).

Nevertheless, despite their thorough analyses of the inscriptions of British imperialism in Pears’ Soap ads, neither Ramamurthy nor McClintock touched upon the connections between scientific racism and British imperialism. As a consequence, they did not explore the way Pears Soap’s ads resonate with scientific racism in the late 19th century which, as I will show, served both as an impetus and a justification for the British imperialist mission.

Therefore, my goal is to contribute to the research of racist advertisement in the late 19th century Britain by focusing on the role scientific racism played in British imperialist mission and consequently, on the way it is echoed Pears’ Soap ads. In further sections I will explore late-19th century British racial science in its relation to British imperialist politics and soap advertising in order to demonstrate that commodity and scientific racism joined forces in justifying British imperialism.

4. History and origins of British scientific racism

The debate between the advocates of monogenesis and polygenesis, which took place in the mid-19th century Britain, was fully resolved by the last quarter of the century in favor of monogenesis. In the 1850s and the 1860s, advocates of the school of polygenesis, such as Robert Knox and James Hunt, then president of the Anthropological Society, claimed that races were “species with separate origins” (Lorimer 1988, 405) with a “distinct, biologically fixed, unequal characteristics” (Lorimer 1988, 405). However, after the initial debates, the school of polygenesis was definitively abandoned in the 1870s in favor of a monogenesis approach consistent with Christianity and the Bible.

The monogenesis approach to race was the belief that “blacks” and “whites” were the same species and the advocates of monogenesis in the last quarter of the 19th century were in fact Darwinists who believed that “mankind had the same origin” (Bratlinger 1985, 182). However, embracing the monogenesis approach did not necessarily entail the abandoning of the “superior vs inferior” race dichotomy, which was a prominent feature of the

polygenesis school. Although the advocates of monogenesis approach believed in the common origin of mankind, they did not see the black and the white races as necessarily equal. The main arguments that supported the inequality of races stemmed directly from evolutionary theory. Therefore, in order to understand the late 19th century scientific racism, one must look into its origins: the theory of evolution, i.e. Darwinism and social Darwinism.

In order to understand the roots of Darwinism and social Darwinism, it is necessary to revisit the theory of Thomas Malthus which was influential for Darwin's theory of natural selection. According to Malthus, poverty in society is "inevitable" and "impossible to alleviate" (Rodgers 1972, 269) because the "power of population is... greater than the power in the earth to produce substance for man" (Rodgers 1972, 270). Therefore, Malthus thought of war and misery as "positive checks" which control the growth of the population (Claeys 2000, 230). The disadvantaged, according to Malthus, should not be helped because that would only help keep alive the "parasites" of the society. Only if the poor and the disadvantaged are productive, i.e. only if they benefit the society, should they be given help according to Malthus (Claeys 2000, 232).

Malthus' theory was highly influential for Darwin's discovery of the process of natural selection. Owing to Malthus, Darwin discovered that since "all organic beings tend to increase", there will be a struggle for resources and existence between them (Rodgers 1972, 270). In this struggle, organisms will try to adapt to the changing circumstances, but not all of them would be equally successful. Those organisms which fail to adapt will be "weeded out" by natural selection (Rodgers 1972, 271). Natural selection, therefore, favors the existence of the more adapted organisms and, in parallel, eliminates those organisms which prove to be less successful in adaptation.

Darwin's idea of natural selection resonates with what was soon to be called social Darwinism: Spencer's theory of the survival of the fittest. Namely, it was Herbert Spencer, a British sociologist, who used the term "survival of the fittest" to describe the competition between people over resources in which "the valuable members of society", the "most useful ones", would survive (Claeys 2000, 235). Since social Darwinism dealt with the society, being fit was not conceptualized as being physically strong, but as being "the most intelligent and adaptable" (Rodgers 1972, 280). The implications of social Darwinism, therefore, were that the poor were poor because they were unfit (Rodgers 1972, 275) and that any kind of war is legitimate (Claeys 2000, 226) because it was seen as a competition in which the more intelligent population wins.

5. Darwinism and race

What were, then, the implications of Darwinism and social Darwinism for race? Although seen as having the same origin and being the part of the same species, the black and white races were not seen as equally intelligent or “fit”. Belonging to a certain race meant having a certain set of characteristics which were inherited biologically, together with their physical forms (Claeys 2000, 246). The black race, according to Darwinists, did not evolve as successfully as the white race did – they were less fit and less intelligent. Therefore, any kind of clash between the white and the black races was understood as competition over resources, in which the more intelligent ones (i.e. the whites) should win. As a result, Darwinism and social Darwinism were used to justify British colonialism and imperialism (Claeys 2000, 237, Lorimer 1988, 430).

Moreover, the perspective on the *causes* of the black race’s “inferiority” significantly changed in British science after the wide acceptance of evolutionary theory in the 1870s. Before Darwinism, differences between races were often explained through environmentalism, the idea that the development of the individual depends on environmental influences (Claeys 2000, 238). However, Darwinism shaped the idea that races and differences between them are determined and inherited *biologically* (Claeys 2000, 238). As Lorimer shows, the biological accounts of racial difference, rather than the environmental explanations, became much more popular in the last two decades of the 19th century in Britain. By 1880s, Lorimer states, “environmentalism was on the losing side of the nature/ nurture argument” (1988, 430). Although there were individuals, such as cultural evolutionist Edward Burnett Tylor, who gave more importance to the “learned behavior or culture” than to “physical differences” (Lorimer 1988, 418), a majority of scientists in the late 19th century Britain thought of racial differences as *biological* differences. For example, the anatomist W. H. Flower, who thought that races underwent a different evolutionary development which influenced different development both of their physical features and their “intellectual and moral qualities” (Lorimer 1988, 419) and Francis Galton, an anthropologist who also claimed that heredity is more influential than environment in the development of individual’s characteristics (Lorimer 1988, 422).

This kind of Darwinist theory of race, i.e. the deterministic approach arguing for biological differences between the races, took its visual shape in the Pears’ Soap ad (fig. 1) featuring a black boy, which I already discussed.

Although the ad demonstrates the civilizing potential of British goods, it is also imbued with skepticism about the limits of the civilization. Since the white boy does not wash away the blackness of the black boy in its entirety, educating the black race (i.e. “civilizing them”) is seen as something that could be achieved only until a certain point. The white race can educate and train black bodies, but they cannot civilize their minds. The inferiority (i.e. the “blackness”) of the black race is represented, therefore, as biologically determined. As Bratlinger (1985) argues, evolutionary anthropology “suggested that Africans... were such an inferior ‘breed’ that they might be impervious to ‘higher influences’” (182). Put differently, this Pears’ ad echoes the prevalent theory of late-19th century British scientific racism: that the black race can be educated to act like the white race, but that educating them by no means makes them equal to the white race because they are biologically inferior. As a result, both in scientific accounts of race and in Pears’ Soap ads, the white race is represented as inherently superior.

6. The British “civilizing mission” in scientific and commodity racism

The fact that British scientists, in light of social Darwinism, thought that the black race was *as a race* less intelligent did not prevent them from claiming “civilization” as their mission. Science, therefore, was not only *used* for purposes of imperialistic justifications, but as Petitjean (1988, 109) argues, science had a *mission* to “provide a rational basis for hierarchizing civilizations” in order to justify the colonization. Bratlinger supports this position, stating, “evolutionary thought seems almost calculated to legitimize imperialism” (1985, 184).

By producing “proof” of racial differences scientists could easily explain the occupation of African territories and then justify the exploitation of their land. First, they were able to use the evolutionary theory to explain the “backwardness” of African peoples and the “superiority” of the white race. Then, they could advocate for the “civilization mission”, in which the “superior” race was supposed to educate the “inferior race”. Science, after all, was defended as inherently altruistic (Petitjean 2005, 117). According to the logic of the late-19th century scientific discourse, although the black race could never become completely “white”, they could be “civilized” to a certain degree, their “savage” customs could be changed and brought closer to the Western ideals.

The “assimilation of blacks to the civilized ideal” project of the British imperialism was based on the monogenesis idea that the black and the white races originated from the same stock (Deacon 1999, 107). The

British, therefore, tried to assimilate the African peoples to the Western civilization through the “rule of law and education” (Deacon 1999, 107). Unlike polygenism theory, according to which the differences between the white and the black races were seen as unchangeable, the widely accepted monogenism theory supposed that, since the black and the white races belong to the same species, the “backward” races could be guided towards civilization (Petitjean 2005, 115).

A number of Pears’ Soap ads echo the “assimilatory ideal” by showing the civilizing mission of the British achieved through the education of the African peoples. One of them, published in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1886 bears the title “The Birth of Civilization: A Message from the Sea” (fig. 2). It shows a black man, dressed in what seemingly perpetuates the idea of the “savage”/ “uncivilized” black person holding a Pears’ Soap bar. He is shown wearing feathers in his hair and a large piercing in his ear. His whole body is completely naked, except for his genitals, which are covered in simple white sheets. The finishing touch of this portrait of a “noble savage” is a spear which the man holds in his left hand.

This “noble savage” is represented standing on a shore and holding in his right hand a Pears’ Soap bar. Next to his feet there is a box labeled “Pears’ Soap” and the back of the picture reveals a sinking ship. The story which the viewer deduces from this image is that, as a consequence of the shipwreck of a boat transferring goods to Africa, a box of Pears’ Soap arrives at the African shore. A black man picks up this mysterious Western product and then the new civilization is born. Just so that the viewer is positively clear that it is indeed Pears’ Soap, i.e. a Western commodity which brings the civilization into “uncivilized” territories, the caption below the image says: “The consumption of soap is a measure of wealth, civilization, health, and purity of the people”. Again, the message that Pears’ wants to send is that washing yourself by using soap, i.e. preserving the health of your skin, is a feature of the civilized Western world. Therefore, the black race is born into civilization as it adopts Western values of cleanliness. As a consequence, once they adopt Western values, the black people become less black/less savage and more white/ more civilized, as the advertisement with the black child demonstrates.

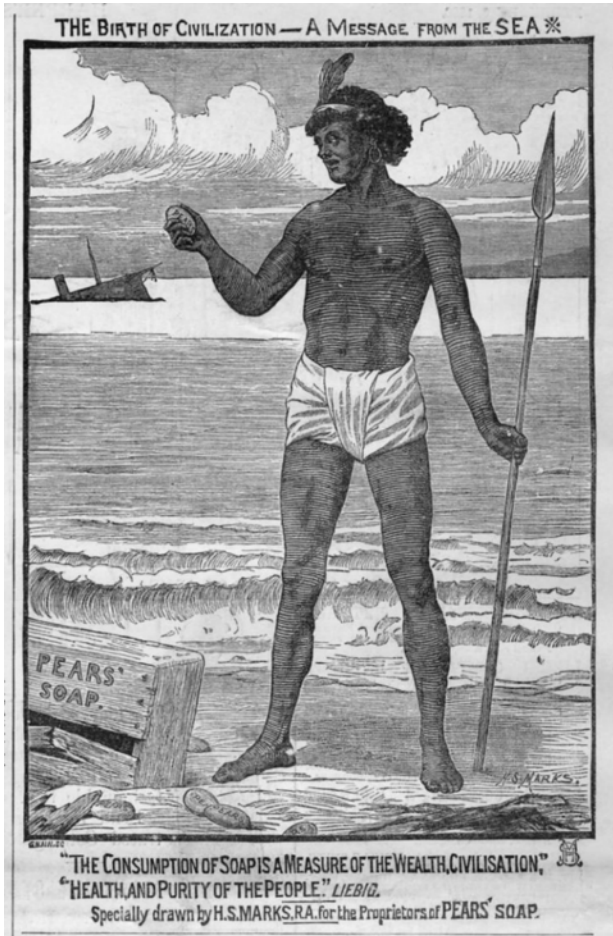
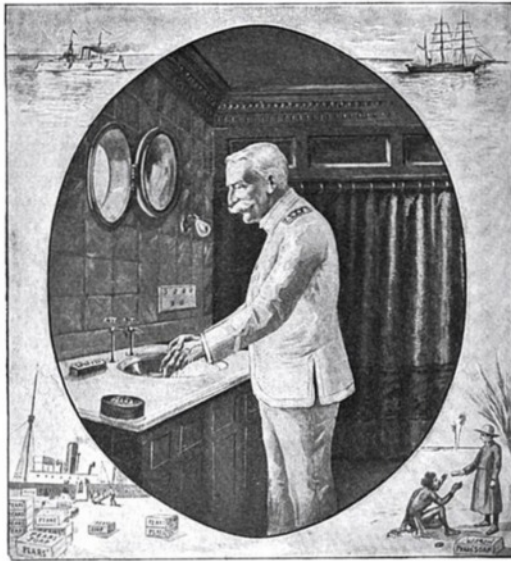


Figure 2: Pears' Soap ad in *Harper's weekly*, February 1886

Therefore, contrary to Darwin's prediction that, as a result of the process of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, the "lower races" would be eliminated by the "higher civilized races" in the near future (quoted in Claeys 2000, 239), the "higher races" decided not to wipe them out but

to “educate and help their lesser brother”. In reality, what happened was that the Western forces realized that they would benefit more from exploitation of black labor than from wiping them out. The “lower race” should not be left to die because, according to Malthusian theory, they served a purpose: they were seen as a “pool of productive labors” (Lorimer 1988, 424). However, the colonial and imperial exploitation of the black working force and their resources had to be represented in a more favorable light that would justify Western occupation of African territories. As Petitjean argues, “altruism” justified economic exploitation and imperialism was defended as a “civilizing mission” (2005, 117).

Another Pears’ Soap ad which perpetuated the scientific theory of the black race being inferior and in need of the British “civilizing mission” appeared in *McClure’s Magazine* in 1899 (fig. 3). The central part of the image shows an elderly white man in a naval uniform washing his hands in a boat cabin. In the upper corners of the ad there are two boats in the ocean and in the lower left corner of the ad we see the unloading of Pears’ Soap cargo from a ship. The lower right corner of the ad shows a white man handing over soap to a kneeling black man completely naked except for the strap covering his genitals. The caption below the picture says: “The first step towards lightening The White Man’s Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness”. It is followed by text: “Pears’ Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place – it is the ideal toilet soap”. The “imperialism as civilizing” message is clearly expressed: the images reveal that the British ships sail towards the new land and that a trade takes place there (the ships are loaded with cargoes). However, the message that the ad sends is not one of British exploitation of African territories: this is not even implied. Rather, what the viewer sees is the representation of British humanitarian actions: yes, the British do sail to new lands, but they do so in order to *bring* the Africans their goods, to civilize and educate the uneducated savage, to “brighten the dark corners of the earth” and to teach them how to be clean and healthy. And the crucial ingredient of their “civilizing” mission is, of course, Pears’ Soap.



The first step towards lightening
The White Man's Burden
is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness.

Pears' Soap

is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place—it is the ideal toilet soap.

Figure 3: Pears' Soap ad in *McClure's Magazine*, October 1899

Following in the footsteps of late 19th century racial science, Pears' Soap ads offered a justification for British imperialist conquest and exploitation of African territories. Therefore, together with science and in accordance with scientific ideas of the era, advertising could serve as a mighty tool in the hands of British politics. Furthermore, advertisements broke the boundaries that science had in its spreading of racist ideas. Being published in newspapers and appearing on boxes of a widely used commodity such as soap, Pears' Soap ads had the potential to reach mass audience. As a result,

owing to mass media and the rise of consumerism, the scientific theories of race arguing for the biological inferiority of the African Other and justifying imperialism as a “civilization mission” were not limited to scientific intellectual circles. They could now reach laypeople through a simple picture on a box of soap.

7. Conclusion

In the last two decades of the 19th century, racial science based on biological differences between races finally found solid proof in Darwin’s theory of natural selection. As a consequence, scientists produced studies arguing for *biological* differences; studies that posited the racial Other as inherently “inferior”, yet capable of limited improvement under the rule of their “more civilized” European brother. In a way, the racial Other was seen as sufficiently biologically similar so as to be molded according to European “civilizing” standards. However, at the same time, the racial Other was described as different enough not to have the same capacities as their European brother, and therefore would remain inherently inferior. As a consequence, the scientific texts justified British imperialist and colonizing mission. During the last quarter of the 19th century science was professionalized and scientists were given authority on the question of racism over laymen, such as travellers and clergy (Lorimer 1988, 429). Therefore the opinion of the scientists and the scientific theories were precious because they could be used as proof of “objectivity” which justified the white race’s rule over the black race.

However, scientific texts were not written for a larger public and therefore only the intellectual elite could have access to them. As McClintock states, scientific journals that published articles on racism were “inaccessible to most Victorians” who lacked means and education to read such material (2000, 131). Therefore, in order to get wider acceptance for its imperialist cause, the British Empire needed to popularize racist theories proposed by science. In brief, British imperialist mission needed the support of the people of Britain as well. As it is the case today, the support of people was gained by using the mass-media, in this particular case – press. Commodity advertising in press, as a result, gave birth to commodity racism. As McClintock argues, unlike scientific racism, commodity racism has a “capacity to expand beyond the literate propertied elite” (2000, 131). Advertisements of such a cheap product as soap, marketed as a necessary element of every household, were aimed both at the middle class and the lower class of Britain.

They were printed in daily newspaper and therefore could reach a large audience.

Science therefore gave an authoritarian and scientifically “objective” justification for British imperialism. Advertising commodities, on the other hand, helped spread these ideas to the popular masses. Echoing scientific racist ideas, Pears’ Soap ads joined hands with science in justifying British imperialist politics by representing the black race as “savages” in need of British civilization. By using racist images which represented the black race as “savage” and “inferior” and by justifying the British imperialism as a “civilizing mission”, Pears’ Soap ads united the divided British classes against a common enemy – the racial Other.

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