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Chinua Achebe and European Rule

Bernhard Dernburg delivered his speech, “England Traitor to the White Race,” on December 10th, 1916. In it, Dernburg issued criticism towards the English due to how they managed their colonies in Africa. His main complaint was that the British were foolish for arming the Africans under their rule with modern technology and pitting them against the empire’s white enemies. Fast forward to 1993, Chinua Achebe delivers his own speech, “The Education of a British-Protected Child,” in which he describes both positive and negative memories of British rule in Nigeria during the 1930s and 1940s. Comparing both “England Traitor to the White Race,” and “The Education of a British-Protected Child,” Dernburg would still disapprove of the future methods that the British utilized in Nigeria during Achebe’s early life.

First off, one could argue that Dernburg *would* approve of the British rule based on the speech from Achebe. From an early age, Africans are taught about British culture. We can see this from Achebe’s section where he reflected on his primary schooling during the 1940s. In what might be bizarre to some, Achebe and some schoolmates were rooting for Britain to win in battle against the Germans during World War II, despite the fact that the British quite literally ruled over them. “I think we were loyal to Britain and did what we could do to help.” (Achebe, 18). They even boastfully sang stirring war songs, such as “Rule Britannia!” Achebe praises his young love for Empire Day, a day dedicated to celebrate Queen Victoria’s birthday, in which the school children participate in a grand field day. They were content with their rule, which would align with the points that Dernburg makes in the second half of his speech, about how, “It was

not the belief in our friendliness but the absolute belief in the power behind this friendliness, a power guaranteeing them unhindered development, that underlay the rejoicing of the populace,” (Dernburg, 2). The populace of where Achebe was from was rejoicing Queen Victoria and the might of the empire against the British; it is obvious that, in some aspects, they were content. Dernburg believes that colonial contentment leads to colonial loyalty to the ruling nation. It is an admirable practice to him; he’s praised Britain on this. Therefore, there is a legitimate argument that Dernburg would admire Britain’s ruling practices during this time based on Achebe’s speech.

Although this is a valid claim to present, this is not a point that would change Dernburg’s mind about the real issue at hand, which is providing modern technology, education, and other luxuries to the colonized Africans. I even have proof that Dernburg would object to that claim! In his own speech, he does approve of the cultural spread that the British had accomplished: “One can agree with the English when they say that they have carried out their mission of culture in the colonies intelligently and efficiently after a number of mistakes- though it must be added that they hit the right method comparatively late in the day.” (Dernburg, 2). He even goes as far to say that they have successfully given them enough freedom to be content with their rule; he’s literally praising this aspect of their colonization in this section of his speech, you cannot deny that.

However, that didn’t stop him from prioritizing their error of allowing the colonized Africans they rule over to have access to modern technology (specifically through warfare) in his own speech. Britain commonly employed the indigenous people across their colonies into their military and police ranks when the empire was at its height, something that Dernburg explicitly disapproves of. We even saw an example of how common this was from the character Amusa in

Death and the King's Horseman; it spread into the media. This practice didn't stop until long after when the British started to decolonize Africa and India. So, although the use of colonial troops is not explicitly mentioned in Achebe's speech, that does not mean they weren't present; mass amounts of colonial troops were still being used to combat Hitler's war efforts in northern Africa during World War II. Often many regiments go uncredited in their participation in these wars, but this does not change the fact that they were there. And, as we of course know already based on his own speech, this is a breaking point for Dernburg's support; he would completely object to the use of these colonial troops and value that over Britain's loyalty practices.

Something that could also prove a problem for Dernburg to support the British colonial practices during Achebe's early life would be Achebe's access to education. We know that Achebe is an accomplished scholar. As we mentioned before, the early schooling that the British provided helped ingrain some core nationalist values in favor of British colonialism. However, these teachings would not last; Achebe would go to Europe and have access to a near equal quality of education compared to a white European scholar. Older and wiser from studies abroad, Achebe was able to articulate and recognize his own oppression and he soon opposed British colonialism over Nigeria and other African nations. Although Dernburg seemed to approve of practices that charm the indigenous peoples (Germany providing gifts towards local and loyal vassals in the second half of his speech), he also seemed to argue that elevating the indigenous people to statuses near equal to that of a white man was an unethical practice (ie. giving equal education). We can see this when he speaks of the practices of the Spanish conquistadors and how the indigenous Mexicans soon realized that they are just as powerful as their rulers once they were able to combat them on equal grounds. Knowledge is indeed power, so giving an indigenous person access to such power would be something Dernburg would not support.

Although there is grounds to believe Dernburg might approve of some practices seen in Achebe's speech, not much has changed; Dernburg would still be able to find more notable criticisms that would leave him with an overall negative opinion of Britain's colonial rule. This would of course be from the access to education Achebe acquired and the continued use of colonial troops throughout the 1900s.