

Friedrich Fabri, *Does Germany Need Colonies?* (1879)

Abstract

The text below was written by Dr. Friedrich Fabri (1824–1891), who has been called the “father of the German colonial movement.” From 1857 onward, Fabri’s main occupation was Director of the Barmen Rhine Missionary Society. That he never actually visited a single German colony did not prevent him from forcefully stating his case in the book *Does Germany need Colonies?* [*Bedarf Deutschland der Colonien?*], originally published in early 1879. (The text reproduced below is from the third edition, dated October 1883.) Fabri tended to overemphasize the singular influence of his book in launching colonial enthusiasm in the early 1880s; nevertheless, both he and his book were much discussed in social circles that also participated in the colonial movement, including bankers, intellectuals, businessmen, and military leaders. At the outset of the text excerpted here, Fabri advances mainly economic arguments for a strong colonial policy. In the second part, he emphasizes the role that emigration to the colonies might play in relieving the threat of Social Democracy and in furthering Germany’s “cultural mission” in the world.

Source

I.

The time really can be said to have come to bring up for public discussion the question “Does Germany need colonies?” Once before, in the first intoxication of joy over the newly created German Reich, in 1871/72, fleeting calls for colonies were heard in our press, calls which sought to give their cause more definition in a few pamphlets. At that time both the Reich Government and public opinion maintained an attitude of reserve, so that this tentative impulse soon died away.

Today the situation is substantially different. As we see it, many pressures now urge us towards a serious consideration of the question raised above; as we see it, public sentiment is now, as a result of our general development during the last few years, fully prepared to apply itself with lively interest to the question of whether the German Reich stands in need of colonial possessions. The reasons for this change of mood are readily discernible. Three considerations may be said to be chiefly decisive in this connection: *our economic position, the crisis in our tariff and trade policy, and our navy which is growing mightily.*

In the new Reich we have of late got into an economic situation which is oppressive, which is truly alarming. It is poor comfort that the trade crisis, which has continued for so long, is putting a heavy strain on more or less all the civilised States. Relatively—leaving Russia and Austria out of account here—Germany can be said to be in the most unfavourable position. Great though the growth of our prosperity may have been in the last few decades compared with earlier times, yet we are still on the whole poor, and the strength and resilience of our national prosperity are not at all proportionate to the plenitude of political power which we have acquired. This could easily create serious difficulties for the continued healthy development of our great national community. Moreover, the situation is all the more fragile because, just when, in the aftermath of the financial boom, we thought ourselves to be very rich, we were suddenly and sharply reminded of our poverty. It has rightly been said that only in this century has Germany recovered economically from the terrible catastrophe of the Thirty Years’ War. Just when, during recent decades, we had begun purposefully to work our way up, there began, shortly after our national resurgence, that depression in business which has now lasted for years and whose end is not yet in sight. It may be assumed that something like a quarter of our national income has disappeared in the last few years, that is to say, has become unproductive. And our national prosperity was, on the whole,

still weak, for it did not undergo that gradual but continuous improvement seen in Britain for the last two centuries, and also in the Netherlands, North America, and even in France, after she had overcome the upheaval of the revolutionary period. The most important factor in the so unfavourable development of the German situation, however, is the rapid rise in the rate of population growth, a circumstance which is of the most far-reaching economic significance, but one which is still quite insufficiently recognised as such, with the result that so far almost nothing has been done to deal with it. [...]

A second pre-condition was required to enable us to approach the problem in question attentively and with an open mind. When, seven years ago, a few isolated calls for the acquisition of colonies were heard in the German press, they were contemptuously dismissed as out of date. Public opinion, dominated by Manchesterism, believed that in unrestricted freedom of trade it had identified for all time the economic philosophers' stone. We are not among the many who today decry the Manchester school. We believe, rather, that the accepted doctrine of free trade has in many ways had a liberating and encouraging effect on the general cultural development of our century. But on two points all level-headed and reasonable people must by now surely be clear. Firstly, that our economic policy, in adopting the Manchester theory, has come more and more to profess a most one-sided dogmatism. It is an old inevitability, and one that has often manifested itself in history, that newly discovered truths fall a ready prey to this fate. Unless careful attention is paid to their natural prerequisites, they are gradually inflated into the one true doctrine, which then, in accordance with the generally prevailing fashion, has to be pursued as rapidly as possible to its remotest conclusions. [...]

It is, however, understandable that, once these errors have made themselves painfully felt, public opinion will reverse itself and he who was long celebrated as infallible will be quickly branded as an arch-villdoer. This is the second point, which is now a matter of established fact. For, that this reversal of public opinion as regards the Manchester school has now in large measure come about, no-one can deny, not even those who see this, if not as a misfortune, then at least as a danger. Meanwhile this reversal of public opinion has in the last few weeks taken on such tremendous proportions that it has already become a highly noteworthy symptom in the psychology of the people. [...]

A third factor which may today incline public opinion towards discussion of the question of whether the new Reich needs colonial possessions, is the development, as rapid as it is powerful, of our German Navy. We admit that we were among those who doubted whether the German Reich was acting correctly in setting itself as one of its first tasks the creation of a large and strong Navy. And even today we are not yet convinced that our doubts were unjustified. In view of the enormous expense which, despite the extremely careful and, indeed, in many respects really thrifty, administration of our military establishment, our land armies impose upon us in view of the necessity of outdoing all the European Great Powers alike in number of troops and in battle-readiness for a long time to come, we hold that Germany is indeed too poor to compete in the long run with other Great Powers as a naval Power as well. There is no doubt that Germany's level of political strength will always be decided by the soundness and the successes of her land armies. If we imagine a German Navy, even of the size and sound construction of the British, what would be its fate on the day on which our land armies were decisively beaten, and, as a result of such defeats, an indemnity of thousands of millions was imposed on the German Reich? We should undoubtedly have to leave our battle-fleet to moulder in our ports, or, at best, sell it at far below cost price in order to meet our debts. Nor would this tragic necessity be spared us if, at the same moment when our land armies were defeated, our battle-fleet were to gain the most glorious victories. This hypothetical case in itself shows, it seems to us, clearly enough that the endeavour to equip Germany with a great and mighty battle-fleet is a somewhat risky one, because as yet it is not a natural enterprise and therefore is to some extent really a luxury.

[...]

And how then should we have such interests in remote countries overseas?

Of course there is a well-developed German merchant navy which sails all the seas, and both our interest and our national duty demand that we afford it a certain degree of protection. We therefore entirely share the desire that the German naval flag should be flown on all the seas and that it should be prepared for demonstrations and, where necessary, for small, rapid actions in the Far East, in the Pacific, in Central and South America, wherever semi-barbaric conditions require this. But these interests call for no battle-fleets, no armoured giants swallowing up many millions of Marks; these are after all quite useless for the above-mentioned tasks. A few dozen sound, fast, fairly small vessels of war would entirely suffice for these purposes. Apart from these, complete protection for our coasts (which are on the whole fairly inaccessible), equipped with the best available defensive matériel, would of course in all circumstances be necessary. But, as is known, the German naval building plan goes far beyond these requirements; what is more, our tremendous construction of naval armament comes at a time when the whole naval system is in a highly critical situation. The question: do we need armour, or guns, or strength, or speed? has not yet been settled, but will, if we are not wholly deceived, be solved more and more in favour of the last alternative. [...]

Often a phase of unconsciousness, or of semi-consciousness, is the prelude to the most fruitful developments, and it is only after some time has passed that one sees in retrospect why in fact things had to turn out as they did. We hope that this may be true, too, of the plan for the foundation of a navy, which today is really no longer a plan but a fact which is soon to be completely accomplished and which has to be reckoned with as such. We too would gladly grow used to welcoming the accomplished fact with joy if the comprehensive plan for the founding of a navy helped, among other things, to give our ambitions for sea-power status a real, tangible background which would be truly supportive of our body politic. This, however, is something which the German Reich can only acquire by embarking upon a judicious and energetic *colonial policy*. This, we are persuaded, is the only way of making our expanded Navy justifiable in the long run, that is to say, of gaining a return on the substantial expenditure which it involves.

[...]

We can add yet a fourth point of view which is helpful in dealing with the question raised here. The present has, rightly, been referred to as an age of travels and of geographical surveys. In these respects we Germans too have of late been busily at work. Our compatriots are engaged in research expeditions in all the quarters of the globe. The number of our geographical periodicals, most of which are extremely sound, as of our geographical societies is steadily growing; interest in geographical, ethnographic and anthropological studies has been powerfully stimulated by scientific research and popular illustrated accounts, and is now very much more widespread among us than it was in earlier decades. This is certainly encouraging. But are we to be and remain only theoreticians in this field too, merely collecting and researching for the benefit of the world at large? Are we to continue sitting in our studies and making ourselves familiar with all the quarters of the globe, without finding a second national home anywhere overseas? Is this a situation which can in the long run be reconciled, we will not say with our national honour, but with urgent national requirements? [...] Should the Kaiser and the Reich, should the Reich Chancellor, the Federal Council and the Reichstag, not now be thinking about doing their share in regaining for the new Reich a part of the old commercial strength? and acquiring for it, albeit belatedly, colonial possessions, without which in the long run it will not be able to survive economically?

[...]

That organised emigration of the kind we need should, apart from its economic significance, also involve important national considerations, is something that we would only touch on in passing, whilst asking: Must our brothers and compatriots who cross the seas always continue to assimilate themselves to our Anglo-Saxon cousins, thus rapidly losing language and nationality, or must they even, in the down-at-heel overseas communities of those of Latin stock, in many cases allow themselves to be treated with

indignity as illegitimate intruders? Does there not arise here, in the national context too, *a question of vital importance* for the German Reich? If the German Reich Government should prove in the long run unable or unwilling to approach with insight and energy the question of organising and managing our system of emigration, then they would without doubt be doing the gravest harm to the normal development of our national prosperity and our political strength.

But what is meant by the management and organisation of our emigration system? Since it is not possible to prescribe destinations, this demand means no less than the creation, where possible, under the German flag, of conditions in foreign countries for our emigrants which will enable them not only to prosper in economic terms, but also, whilst preserving their language and nationality, to maintain an active national and economic interchange with the mother country. In other words, embarking intelligently and energetically upon a genuine colonial policy is the only effective means of transforming German emigration from an outflow of energies into an inflow of both economic and political energies. [...]

Various conclusions which are significant from the point of view of cultural history may be drawn from this brief analysis of the essential nature and the development of agrarian colonies. First, that we have here a form of colonisation which is entirely peculiar to modern times. Second, that only a mother country which is able to produce a continuous supply of superfluous labour is qualified to found agrarian colonies; and that therefore it is today only for the Germanic race to engage in this more modern form of colonial creation. Furthermore, the correct method of administration may be said to have been already established through the fortunate fact of Britain's having applied it first. Since the centre of gravity of these sub-tropical colonies rests entirely upon the white immigrants, they necessarily oust the generally scanty residue of coloured natives. Accorded equality with the white man before the law, albeit not entirely equal where political rights are concerned, they are either scattered over the colony as labourers, or restricted to certain specific areas. A situation which, when it is accompanied by humane aspirations for the intellectual and moral development of the natives, may be said in practice to be entirely well-conceived. Moreover, in these British agrarian colonies the principle obtains of government as little as possible from the homeland, but rather, as soon as the colony has grown strong enough for the task, self-government to the fullest possible degree and on the basis of free political institutions. Any thought of gaining in these colonies any direct sources of income for the mother country would be a gross politico-economic error. On the contrary, the mother country will, particularly in the early stages, have to furnish many subventions. But the mother country will soon receive these again with the richest interest to boot. In this connection we do not have in mind those colonials who from time to time return to the mother country with a handsome fortune, although even this form of increase of the national prosperity is not negligible. In agrarian colonies, however, this is really the exception rather than the rule. Much more important, in any case, is the overall economic relationship between mother country and colony. The exchange of colonial products for the industrial products of the mother country will not only grow at a rapidly rising rate, strengthening the shipping trade of the latter, but, what is so very important in trade relations, a firm and steady interchange will develop between the consumption and sales of either side. Even in conditions of full freedom of trade or perhaps of moderate tariff barriers, both the shipping trade and the industry of other States will strive in vain to enter into successful competition in face of this firm relationship with the mother country. This is demonstrated by the British colonies in numerous kinds of trade statistics. In view of the foregoing, and given our German emigration and our industrial and economic situation, it seems to us that only the ignorant or the wholly prejudiced could deny that agricultural colonies are urgently necessary to the new German Reich.

[...]

Among the economic factors which have done much to promote the rise and the swift and large-scale spread of *Social Democracy* in this country, apart from the unhealthily precipitate development of our

industry with its resultant crises, over-production and unemployment, the rapid increase in population (particularly in the industrial regions) is certainly among the foremost. Admittedly economic causes are by no means the only, indeed, they are today not even the most important, in leading to the rise and development of the Social Democratic movement. As everywhere in the life of mankind, here too the moral factors, which seek and find a basis for themselves in the economic ones, are really what is decisive. Merely demonstrating—however convincingly and cogently—that the economic demands of Social Democracy are impossible of fulfilment and in the last analysis Utopian, in itself achieves little. If Christianity with its reconciling power has, alas, become unfamiliar, indeed odious and contemptible to wide circles in this country, if moral convictions, if the most commonplace religious beliefs have been undermined, and their place taken by the doctrine of materialism, then no-one can stop a man from making demands of this earthly life which it can never satisfy. In the glaring disparity between these delusive hopes and the existing naked reality there is ignited that implacable hatred of things as they are which, *inter alia*, imagines that only by violent and bloody upheaval can matters be improved. In these states of mind lies the key point of our Social Democrats' agitation and its consequences. Could one but dispel the idea of human happiness which during the last decade our Social Democrats have been sedulously building into their imaginings, reveal to them the secret of contentment and arouse in them hopes of a new kind, then our Social Democratic crisis would be largely resolved, that is to say, an atmosphere would have been created in which the economic reforms and measures of support to which our working class are fully entitled could be successfully carried out. Without that atmosphere, the creation of which, admittedly, requires above all a sincere goodwill and a genuine willingness to make sacrifices on the part of the propertied classes, both unfortunately often still lacking, even the best-intentioned efforts to render economic assistance will usually only meet with stubborn ingratitude. Ought not the question of colonies, and/or the organising and management of German emigration, to have an important effect in this direction too? Would this not, indeed, be inevitable? Did not our Social Democracy become what it is precisely in the period when, with the beginning of our economic crisis, the existing overpopulation began to make itself pronouncedly felt? I am, however, not thinking of emigration merely as a kind of safety-valve. For one thing, I place a much higher value on the psychological impression which a well-run, large-scale and successful emigration would soon have on the imagination—whose great importance in all spheres of thought and effort is usually vastly underrated—of wide circles of our people. Emigration along these lines would evoke new, not unattainable, hopes, if not perhaps among the fanatics, then at least among the majority of those who have, rather, been led astray and who really feel oppressed, and this in itself would set a limit to creeping discontent.^[1]

[...]

There is in the new Reich already much that has been so envenomed, so soured and poisoned by futile party bickering, that the opening up of a new and promising path of national development might well have, as it were, a widely liberating effect, in that it would powerfully stimulate the national spirit in new directions. This too would be gratifying, and an advantage. More important, it is true, is the consideration that a people which has been led to the pinnacle of political power, can succeed in maintaining its historic position only for as long as it recognises and asserts itself as the *bearer of a cultural mission*. This is at the same time the only way of ensuring the continuance and growth of the national prosperity, the necessary basis for the continued exercise of power. The days are past when Germany's share in carrying out the tasks of our century consisted almost exclusively in intellectual and literary activity. We have become political, and powerful as well. But political power, when it forces itself into the foreground as an end in itself among a nation's aspirations, leads to cruelty, indeed barbarism, if it is not ready and willing to fulfil the cultural tasks of its age, ethical, moral and economic. The French political economist Leroy Beaulieu concludes his work on colonisation with the words: "That nation is the world's greatest, which colonises most; if it is not the greatest today, it will be tomorrow." No-one can deny that in this direction Britain far surpasses all other States. There has admittedly often been talk during the past decade,

particularly in Germany, of “the declining power of Britain.” Those who can only estimate the power of a State in terms of the size of its standing army (as has indeed become almost the custom in our iron age), may well regard this opinion as justified. But those who let their gaze wander over the globe and survey Great Britain’s mighty and ever-increasing colonial empire, those who consider what strength she derives from that empire, with what skill she administers it, those who observe how commanding a position the Anglo-Saxon race enjoys in all countries overseas, to them this talk will seem the reasoning of an ignoramus. That Britain, moreover, maintains her world-wide possessions, her position of predominance over the seas of the world, with the aid of troops whose numbers scarce equal one quarter of the armies of one of the military States of our continent, constitutes not only a great economic advantage, but also the most striking testimony to the solid power and the cultural strength of Britain. True, Great Britain today will remain as much as possible aloof from continental mass wars, or at most will only engage in action jointly with allies, which, however, will not harm the island kingdom’s power position. It would, in any case, be advisable for us Germans to learn from the colonial skill of our Anglo-Saxon cousins and begin to emulate them in peaceful competition. When, centuries ago, the German Reich stood at the head of the States of Europe, it was the foremost trading and seagoing Power. If the new German Reich wishes to entrench and preserve its regained power for long years to come, then it must regard that power as a cultural mission and must no longer hesitate to resume its *colonising vocation* also.

NOTES

[1] Whether, and to what extent, if German emigration were to be organised, the Reich Government would have to subsidise the impecunious for purposes of resettlement, is something which of course does not require further examination here. We would, however, with certain reservations, decidedly answer this question in the affirmative, if only to ensure that every paterfamilias who was in straitened circumstances, whose earnings were insufficient and whose means were not enough to enable him to emigrate is able to say to himself: “I can better my lot.” Where this perception exists half the work is already done, or at least the main sting of the oppression from which people suffer has been removed. [Footnote from Friedrich Fabri, *Bedarf Deutschland der Colonien? / Does Germany Need Colonies? Eine politische-ökonomische Betrachtung von D[r. Theol.] Friedrich Fabri*, edited, translated, and introduced by E. C. M. Breuning and Muriel Evelyn Chamberlain, *Studies in German Thought and History*, no. 2. Lewiston. NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998.]

Source of English translation: Friedrich Fabri, *Bedarf Deutschland der Colonien? / Does Germany Need Colonies? Eine politische-ökonomische Betrachtung von D[r. Theol.] Friedrich Fabri*, edited, translated, and introduced by E. C. M. Breuning and Muriel Evelyn Chamberlain, *Studies in German Thought and History*, no. 2. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998, pp. 46–59, 78–79, 82–85, 148–53, 178–81. Republished with permission.

Source of original German text: Friedrich Fabri, *Bedarf Deutschland der Kolonien? Eine politisch-ökonomische Betrachtung*, 3rd ed. Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1883. The first edition of this text from 1879 is available online at:

<https://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de/Vta2/bsb11388766/bsb:BV010502721?page=5>.

Recommended Citation: Friedrich Fabri, *Does Germany Need Colonies?* (1879), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*,

<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1867> [September 10, 2024].