The causes of the wave of colonial conquests from the 1870s onward are complex. Much has already been written about the economic and geopolitical calculations which originally informed the various imperial initiatives, and which subsequently drew more European powers into what came to be known as the “scramble for Africa”.¹ On the eve of the colonial partition of the continent occurring in the last decades of the 19th century, slavery in Africa attracted a great deal of attention in the Western world. From the 1860s onward, European travelers in Africa began to use the imagery of backwardness and violence to describe a continent seemingly crying out for European intervention. Ironically, the slave trade, which European money had done so much to stimulate and make into a regular business, became the central image of Africa. Even the improved techniques of commodity production – seemingly in tune with Europe’s growing demand for raw materials – gave rise to anxieties that in Africa the economic process was too violent and too unpredictable for Europe to leave alone.²

Especially the story of David Livingstone’s voyages in the 1860s had publicized a view of the African – once the Enslaved Victim – as the Enslaving Tyrant.³ His arguments appealed to the European merchant and to the “friend of the native” alike. He portrayed the slave trade as an “insurmountable barrier to all moral and commercial progress,” destroying the order necessary for the normal operation of trade, ruining incentives to engage in agriculture or wage labor, and pressuring

¹ Wesseling, _Divide and Rule_; Eckert and Wirz, “Scramble for Africa.”
² See, for instance, Lynn, _Commerce and Economic Change_.
³ On Livingstone see Ross, David Livingstone.
people into acceptance of demeaning forms of protection.\textsuperscript{4} Other contemporary media and popular books likewise presented heartrending descriptions of the horrors of slave raids, and the suffering of thousands of hapless victims who were brutally torn from their homes and marched off to a lifetime of bondage. Colonization was now advocated as the only way to save Africans from their own violence and tyranny, and to “open” the continent to the benign benefits of legitimate commerce.

Such arguments were extended from the areas where the slave trade was supplying African slave owners, to regions in Africa where slavery was really not significant at all. The same imagery was used to portray chiefs or kings as predatory tyrants, and peasants as irrational and backward.\textsuperscript{5} The implication of the rhetoric was that late-19th century colonizations – unlike the Spanish conquest of the Americas, for instance – were disciplined, restrained and forward-looking affairs. The European powers, amidst their serious rivalries, took such imagery seriously enough to hold two conferences in Berlin and Brussels between 1884 and 1890 to stipulate rules for colonial practice, including the principle that the conquering powers had to abolish the slave trade.\textsuperscript{6}

The idea of Africa as a slave-ridden continent, oppressed by its own tyrants and kept off the path to civilization, Christianity and commerce, was crucial to missionary propaganda from the 1860s on. It was also the rallying cry of anti-slavery meetings for the rest of the century, and a major component of the knowledge of Africa available to the reading publics of Europe. Such an ideological invention was obviously not in itself the cause of the new wave of conquest, but it did allow the advocates of imperial advance to identify their worldly interests with a larger ethical purpose.\textsuperscript{7}

The shift to direct state intervention in trade and production overseas was consistent with the increasing social interventions of regimes in Europe itself – state efforts to transform the “residuum” of capitalist development into “respectable” working classes. “The old Europe

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{4} Livingstone, \textit{Narrative of an Expedition}, p. 595. See also Cooper, “Conditions Analogous to Slavery,” pp. 114f.

\textsuperscript{5} Cooper, “Africa in a Capitalist World,” p. 400.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid. On the Berlin conference 1884/85, see Förster, Mommsen, and Robinson, \textit{Bismarck, Europe, and Africa}; on the Brussels conference see Miers, \textit{Britain and the Ending of the Slave Trade}.

\textsuperscript{7} Cooper, “Conditions Analogous to Slavery,” p. 115.