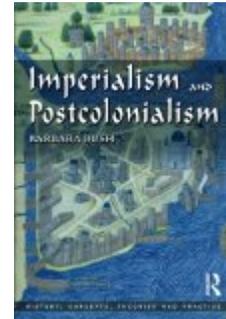


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara Bush. *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006. xxiv + 280 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-50583-4.

Reviewed by Chris Youe (Department of History, Memorial University, Newfoundland)  
Published on H-SAfrica (August, 2007)



## Separate Spheres: The Imperial and the Postcolonial

This book is the third in a new series called History: Concepts, Theories and Practice. In the words of the series editor, Alan Munslow, “each volume is open to the idea of history as a historicist cultural discourse constituted by historians as much as it is reconstructed from the sources available about the past” (p. xi). Certainly Barbara Bush’s ambitious survey of the historiography of imperialism comes to grips with the many interpretations of imperialism from ancient to postmodern, with the focus on the “in-between” years of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European empires. Yet Bush also critiques Munslow’s explicitly postmodern position that history is merely historiography divorced from a “truth” that is unattainable. In a way, she has little choice because she has to navigate through a conceptual and interpretative minefield, giving all sides the opportunity to be heard. The division that stands out in all of this is the chasm between conventional materialist historians (most of them non-Marxist), who engage the “real” world of politics and economics (the “polecons”), and the postmodernists who privilege culture, identity, and “imaginaries” (the “pomos”). In *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*, the preface is written by Alan Munslow (pomo), but the foreword is penned by Peter Cain, whose formidable (Marxist) text co-authored with Anthony Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, makes him the doyen of the polecons.[1] Bush wants the best of both worlds, but leans towards the former. “Empiricist labours in the archives,” she writes, “have been belittled as having insufficient theoretical depth and jargon-free narratives dismissed as “fiction.” Why is it so difficult to merge the empirical with the theoretical and conceptual and

achieve critical depth without joining an elite club with its own special language that deters interlopers and thus preserves its own mystique? Why are the conventional majority so antipathetic to conceptual and theoretical innovation” (p. 60)?

Earlier in the text, in a section labeled “Untangling Concepts and Theories,” she throws everything into the pot: “arguably, the most plausible explanations of imperialism need to account for the interaction of the economic, political, social, and cultural factors operating at both the local (periphery) level and within the metropolitan centre of imperial power” (p. 47).

How does this play itself out in the real world of historiography? Well, the pomos and the polecons are for the most part at one with an anti-imperial critique (Niall Ferguson notwithstanding), and would agree with Barbara Bush’s contention that the colonized came off the worst in the colonizer-colonized nexus (p. 8), although that is hardly saying much. Marxist and postcolonial historians generally offer a radical critique, with Richard Young (summed up approvingly by Bush) arguing that “the historical role of Marxism remains fundamental to postcolonial thinking ... combining its critique of objective material conditions with detailed analysis of their subjective (cultural) effects” (p. 55). The postcolonial deference to elements of Marxism is not reciprocated. As the editors of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* stated in the issue that ushered in the new millennium, lamenting the desertion of the pomos from the editorial board, postmodernism was an “ostensibly depoliticized

cultural antiquarianism ... [a] form of voyeurism [involving] nothing more than retailing stories about the quaintness/'otherness' of plebian tradition and custom ... for the delectation of a middle-class academic readership. In contrast to such an approach, whereby those below are perceived to be empowered by virtue of having a culture, this journal will examine the latter through the lens of political economy.”[2]

It is doubtful that a critique of objective material conditions constitutes Marxism (the anti-structural and anti-grand narrative positioning of the pomos suggests otherwise), but concern for the marginalized animates both perspectives. Bush promises to bring together the cultural and the material, and so approves Bernard Cohn's stance that empire was as much cultural/intellectual, as much predicated on “colonial knowledge” (to know them is to rule them) as it was a “political/economic” phenomenon (p. 116).

What Bush's book shows though, despite her best intentions and despite an impressive range of scholarship, is that the pomos and polecons are uneasy bedfellows. The difficulty is that most of the traditional historians are anti-theoretical, whereas the new historians endeavor to promote a philosophy of history (as I mentioned before, the series is subtitled *Concepts, Theories and Methods*). And, in an historiographical world where you are charged with outlining the “state of the discipline” you cannot force together such mutually exclusive positions. The reason for this disjuncture is to be found in the quite distinct remits of the polecons and the pomos. Bush points out early on in the book that “resistance and imperial power” are “implicitly linked” (p. 6); later on, she intimates that collaboration has often not been analyzed from the colonized standpoint (p. 124).

Here lies the division: those who study such things as politics, war, and trade, “old-style” imperial history, are concerned with power and causation; cultural historians, representing the new wave, are concerned with powerlessness, resistance, and consequence (the impact of colonialism rather than the reasons for it). The former could be accused of being more Eurocentric, but the lack of a debate is due to two sets of historians operating in different spheres. Within the political economy group, there have been debates: why did Europe scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century? How did European power manifest itself in the colonial situation? What exactly is informal empire or a “semi-colony” (Lenin's term)? Why did European empires collapse after World War II? With few exceptions, Bush avoids these ques-

tions. She refuses to enter into the “theoretical debates about the causes of imperialism” as these have already been “developed” [sic]; the same too with theories of decolonization, as “the literature on this specialized topic in now vast” and, the move from colonization to decolonization is “seamless” (p. 7).

Of course, authors have the right to omit particular topics, but one would have thought that, in an historiographical survey, some attention could be given to the biggest debates on imperialism, debates which certainly have resonance in a postcolonial world where we want to understand the material nature of contemporary empire. The polecon emphasis on power and structures, on analyzing the world that Munslow suggests we will never understand, is at odds with understanding the cultural impact on lives lived in the postcolony. The structures of power are no doubt linked to experiences of the marginalized, but they are only tenuously linked in the historiography.

The linkage that does exist is on the nature of empire, or what might be termed the *colonial impact*. That could mean the colonial impact on the metropolitan country, as in there “Ain't No Black in the Union Jack” (the title of Paul Gilroy's book on racial politics in England, published by the University of Chicago twenty years ago), but more often than not the focus is on the colony. Scholars rightly criticized the editors of the recent multivolume *Oxford History of the British Empire* for not dealing with culture, identity, race, and gender, something partly remedied with the release of companion volumes. Yet, there is an emphasis in the *Oxford History of the British Empire* on individual colonies rather than the overarching theorizing of “imperialism,” with a major emphasis on the conceptual approach of the late Oxbridge historians, Ronald Robinson and Jack Gallagher, especially the concept of informal empire.

Informal empire gets four brief mentions in *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*, but it is the cultural impact of imperialism that concerns Barbara Bush the most. In her four case studies—Ireland, China/Japan, British Africa, and “Representing Empire in British Culture”—Bush elucidates the ambiguities of the colonial impact, interrogating the changing nature of racism (as Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse said, “not simply a by-product of empire but ... part of the intestines of empire”), identity (including nationalism), and gender.[3] In a sparse, clipped style which privileges the commentators over the “agents” of empire (in one short paragraph we are treated to summaries of Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel

Foucault), Bush makes a valiant effort to fuse the multiple perspectives of imperial historiography. She moves through ancient and early European empires at break-neck pace (pp. 10-17), but her interest clearly lies in the European empires of the modern/postmodern era. She also is alert to the current form and content of empire, covering, among other things, indigenous protests such as the Mapuche Indian lawsuit against Benetton in 2004; Maori and Innu deprivation in New Zealand and Canada (but Bush does not link this to internal colonialism, a concept she mentions in her case-study of Ireland but without acknowledging Michael Hechter, the man who invented the term); race riots in Britain; and U.S. global reach.

Despite my reservations, this is an impressive work, one that asks questions, probes ambiguities, and raises a myriad of issues. It is not surprising that a book covering imperialism from Roman times until now should, in parts, be superficial. For instance, a section devoted to the contradictions of imperialism and modernity (pp. 87-91) rather misses the distinct phases of the imperial impact on Africa, from the elevation of the educated elites in the Chartered Company era to their denigration in the age of indirect rule, as well as the distinctions within segregationism. Sometimes the need to be concise misleads, or leaves the reader hoping for more analysis. For instance, the question of “informal empire” is pithily but erroneously summed up with the statement “informal imperialism can exist without colonialism but colonialism cannot exist without imperialism” (p. 46). Bearing in mind that the likes of George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, and Condoleeza Rice can deny being imperialist because intervention in Iraq is not aimed at territorial conquest, we could postulate that Iraq is an example of “informal imperialism without colonialism.” But Iraq was a post-World War I colonial invention: it was, in Leo Amery’s words, “a splendid training ground” for the Royal Air Force. Sir Henry Dobbs, the High Commissioner in Iraq in 1923, was ordered to build up a “sovereign but compli-

ant Iraqi state.”[4] Multinational oil interests have dominated the economy, and the United States has dictated the direction of Iraqi politics (not successfully). Only a narrow view of colonialism will divorce it from “informal empire.”

Expanding the boundaries of historical scholarship is, to my mind, much more beneficial than plowing the same old furrows. Dane Kennedy, in two articulate, insightful articles, offers encouragement to the integration of the imperial and the postcolonial.[5] As I browse my office bookshelves, I see many books on postcolonial themes on Africa—on the politics of the womb, on colonial psychiatry, on race and gender—and the empirical foundation of these monographs is rich and varied. How marvelous to have an excellent collection of documents on the scramble for Africa edited by two professors of English. This is “hard” history (a favorite term of the polecons to distance themselves from the pomos). There is little doubt in my mind that the revival and enrichment of imperial history owes much to the so-called cultural turn or post-modernism. Barbara Bush captures the protracted moment.

#### Notes

[1]. P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 2002).

[2]. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 28, no. 1 (2000).

[3]. Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation* (London: Pluto Press, 1990).

[4]. Formal instructions, cited in Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 26.

[5]. Dane Kennedy, “Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24, no. 3 (1996): 345-363; and “The Boundaries of Oxford’s Empire,” *International History Review* 23, no. 3 (2001): 604-621.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

**Citation:** Chris Youe. Review of Bush, Barbara, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13529>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).