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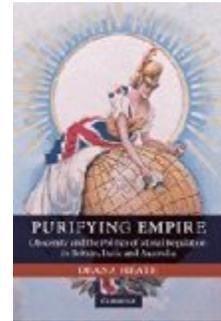
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deana Heath. *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. vi + 238 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19435-8.

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Historians of the British Empire have always struggled to explain how small numbers of white colonial administrators were able to “rule” vast numbers of African and Asian subjects. Traditional answers emphasized the limited ambitions of the laissez-faire colonial state to influence the lives of those it governed, beyond securing a stable environment for free enterprise. They also pointed to the importance of the passive consent of those ruled by colonial states, and to the active “collaboration” of some African and Asian subjects in the construction and maintenance of the colonial order. More recently, historians have focused on the ability of the colonial state to create, control, and organize information and knowledge in ways that supported its own authority and undermined the ability of colonial subjects to resist its demands. Some have been influenced by Edward Said’s claim that empire rested on the creation and perpetuation of false and damaging understandings of the cultures of colonized peoples. Others have argued quite the opposite: Christopher A. Bayly, for example, has shown that successful British overrule in India was based on an ability to take control of existing, indigenous sources of information, as part of a broader British usurpation and retooling of Mughal imperial structures. Indian nationalism triumphed when it managed to wrest control of those intelligence sources from the raj.[1]

An interest in the links between empire, information, and communication has also been present in recent work on the history of nineteenth-century globalization. Scholars of globalization have tended to see the development of flows of information and culture, and the widening out and strengthening of those flows to better connect different parts of the world, as a central feature of

the creation of a more global Victorian order. European empires have been identified as playing a key role in facilitating and shaping the development of these webs of interconnection. Recent work by some historians of empire has followed a similar vein: it is now often argued that, during the nineteenth century, “imperial networks” were forged to connect Britain up with its colonies and to link the colonies up with each other. Knowledge and information flowed through these networks, facilitating, for example, fierce debates among settlers and humanitarians over the treatment of indigenous peoples in British colonies, as Alan Lester has shown.[2] Subsequently, the emergence of new communications technologies, such as the steamship, submarine telegraph cable, radio, and airplane, encouraged more structured and systematic links to be forged among different parts of the empire. Formalized, less flexible, channels of communication underpinned a globalizing late imperial world-system.

Contemporaries saw the development of these communication links, and the flows of people, goods, and information that they facilitated, as part of the progressive achievement of empire. This was one of the economic aspects of the “civilizing mission” of the British Empire: knowledge and prosperity was spread by constructing a global infrastructure of modern transport and communication links. Indeed, for historians like Niall Ferguson (in *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* [2003]), this is one of the positive legacies of empire, intimately connected with the creation of a more integrated world economy and the spread of free-market values. Yet, as Ronald Hyam pointed out a while back, “the empire was as much a system of prostitution networks as it was ... a web of submarine cables” (p. 89).[3]

The Victorians were well aware that the creation of their modern nation and world-system had a seamier, uncivilized side: contemporary observers like Robert Southey lamented that factories in the north of England vomited out pollution and contagion, while workers were condemned to misery and physical degeneration; disease stalked the overcrowded and unsanitary cities of Britain and its colonies; and crime found new opportunities in the expanding metropole and on the turbulent colonial frontier. In *Purifying Empire*, Deana Heath seeks to show how some of the products of the “Victorian underworld” were exported overseas, through imperial networks and trade systems, piggy-backing on Victorian legitimate commerce.

Heath is interested in a wide range of “obscene” products: literature deemed to contain obscene passages (much of it translated from French, and indeed much of it the work of Émile François Zola); pornographic texts, images, and knick-knacks; abortifacients; sex toys; and Indian religious texts and art believed by some to be obscene. As Heath notes, little of the actual material that was so condemned and regulated has survived, not even locked away in the dark recesses of the British Library or other copyright collections, for obscene texts were not covered by copyright. An account of the topic thus has to be pieced together from the secondhand reports preserved in the official archives of regulatory and censorship authorities. Imagine trying to analyze contemporary debates about the cultural or political role of the Victorian press, but with no printed newspapers from the time available to read: this is the sort of problem encountered by scholars working on the obscene.

We get hints in *Purifying Empire* of the moral campaigning against obscenity that must have obsessed many a Victorian Mary Whitehouse. We hear little about the origins, management, or support base for these campaigns, and get little guidance as to how realistic the claims of campaigners about imperial flows of obscenity actually were. These claims form a key source of evidence for studying the topic more generally: but can we really accept them at face value, when they were clearly devised and deployed so as to have maximum contemporary political impact? Did policymakers take the claims and demands of moral campaigners entirely seriously, or were they seen as pious do-gooders with a limited grasp of what was possible, as humanitarians were often viewed by Victorian civil servants and politicians?

In its first three chapters, *Purifying Empire* contains an extended, theoretically inspired discussion of the con-

cepts “governmentality” and “biopolitics,” along with an overview of the literature on the history of the marketing and regulation of obscenity in Britain. The main body of primary material is examined in the last two chapters of the book. These contrast attempts to regulate obscene publications and goods in Australia and India, two parts of the British Empire that imported significant amounts of British culture, respectable and otherwise. In Australia, federation in 1901 allowed the creation of an effective customs system for the new nation-continent, which seems to have been able to exert considerable control over the inflow of obscenity, through sheer bureaucratic weight of numbers. Heath links this to the broader tendencies toward exclusion evident in the white Australia policy of discrimination against nonwhite immigrants: both policies, she claims, were manifestations of ideas about national and racial “hygiene.” In India, by contrast, the colonial state waged a much less effective war on obscenity. It was unable to muster the bureaucratic resources necessary to regulate closely such a massive society, in which the consumption of print culture was widespread, and in which cultural and linguistic diversity multiplied the difficulties of defining and identifying what exactly was obscene. Moreover, Heath argues, in India the colonial state was not trying to build a nation, in the way that the Australian settler state was: ideas about cultural “hygiene” thus only gained a purchase later, and then largely on Indian nationalist elites with their nation-building aspirations, rather than on white colonial administrators. Thus, despite its more obviously coercive nature, the colonial state seems to have “ruled” much less successfully, and much less ambitiously, than the settler state, when it came to controlling this particular type of information. *Purifying Empire* sets an agenda for future research in this field.

Notes

[1]. Christopher A. Bayly, “Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27 (1993): 3-43; and Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[2]. Alan Lester, “British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire,” *History Workshop Journal* 54 (2002): 24-48.

[3]. Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 212.

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