H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen Howe, ed. *New Imperial Histories Reader.* Routledge Readers in History Series. New York: Routledge, 2009. 480 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-42457-8; $44.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-42458-5.

Reviewed by John Corbally (Stanford University)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Thomas Hajkowski

In *The New Imperial Histories Reader*, Stephen Howe offers a diverse collection of essays focusing on imperialism and its effects. Designed for undergraduate and graduate students, this collection aims to revise–and refute–the historical scholarship of a group of traditional imperial historians, loosely defined as the Cambridge School, frequently referenced, mostly male, white scholars. For the *Reader*, Howe chooses publications that start from the assumption that this imperial scholarship was seriously flawed. Hence, these diverse essays are unified by a conscious effort to counter work by such scholars as P. J. Marshall, D. K. Fieldhouse, Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, and Peter Cain and A. G. Hopkins.

Howe's introduction is particularly valuable, providing indispensable context for the thirty pieces. Howe explains his choices for inclusion, offering readers a sense of what is at stake in these debates and illustrating the "sides" different scholars take. Here he also groups the essays into ten larger themes: "Languages"–addressing definitions of empire and recent pejorative use of the term; "Theories"–questioning the empiricist bias in older histories as well as an inverse absence of historical specificity in much of the postcolonial scholarship intended to counter them; "Power, Knowledge and Interest"–considering the mutual indifference between economic and political approaches to empire and more recent, theory-laden culturalist works; "Colonialism and Capitalism"–placing scholars who consider the legacy of imperialism of central interest against those accused of Eurocentrism due to an apparent unwillingness to concede the destructive effects of empire; "Ideologies"–comparing the "intentional" view of empire as a purposely designed project versus the "absence of mind" school; "Spaces and Places"–inquiring into the impact of the colony on the metropole and surveying the "minimalist" versus "maximalist" impact debate; "Nations or Networks? "–exploring ways in which to conceptualize historical units of analysis outside of the oft-used nation-state model; "Collaboration"–asking to what degree local elites were complicit in maintaining colonial rule; "Resistance"–probing whether independence was secured by internal local resistance or through larger structural-historical forces; "Violence and Genocide? "–describing the elements of imperial rule that imperial historians overlook in cheerier versions of the imperial past; and "Modernity and Archaism"–which considers imperialism as responsible for modernizing some colonized regions but archaizing others.

The stated aim of the *Reader* is not to resolve the numerous conflicts outlined above, but to break down barriers between "ultra-empiricist and over-theoretical" analyses of empire (p. 16). Howe rightly points to the influence over the last few decades of non-historians, such as Michel Foucault and Edward Said, and indeed their ideas inform numerous pieces here. And while this ordering of motifs might be confusing, since the essays are also bunched into twelve separate chapter groupings, if students do not grasp the historiographical or interdisciplinary questions at stake when assigned such readings, apathy or confusion inevitably ensues. Howe has done teachers a service by filling in these pedagogical holes.

The *Reader* begins with several pieces that consider colonialism as an all-encompassing and pathological system of control. In a 1951 work entitled "The Colonial Situation," George Balandier prophesies coming debates. Balandier exposes some of the unseen effects of the imperial power disparity, describing colonization as a "single-complex or totality" of deceit and hypocrisy (p. 27). Antoinette Burton's excerpted work, "Rule of Thumb," criticizes "historiographical boundary-keeping," while noting British historians' propensity to "sacralize" foundational constructs, such as "Britain, China, India or Africa"

(pp. 47-49). Concluding the opening salvo on Eurocentric, nation-state-focused, pro-empire readings of the past is Dipesh Chakabarty's well-known "Provincializing Europe," which compels European historians to address the asymmetric imbalance that limits, in his view, their canon of historical scholarship.

Ensuing essays address equally significant subjects, such as imperial sexuality, gender practices, and psychology (from Kathleen Wilson, Ann Laura Stoler, and Bernard Cohn). These will be a heavy load for undergraduate students, likely leading to misapprehension or skimming, which is unfortunate given their importance. Fortuitously, there are more readable works to follow by other notable scholars, such as Frederick Cooper, Nicholas Dirks, Ashis Nandy, Wendy Webster, Paul Gilroy, Bill Schwarz, Andrew Thompson, and John MacKenzie. Abstruse or otherwise, all of these works serve Howe's purpose of providing a strong grounding in the new imperial scholarship of the last two decades.

Arguably, the most innovative work comes from scholars on the periphery of the Anglo-American academy, some of whom offer nicely nuanced local-imperial analyses. Philip Zachernuk's study of late nineteenth-century Nigerian intellectuals displays the complicated dialectic between the mentalities of local elites and European colonizers, with Victorian and African mores melding to form novel modes of thinking. Similarly, Jonathon Glassman complicates postcolonial critiques of Enlightenment rationalism and liberal imperialism by illuminating how Islamic ideologies produced their own all-encompassing and constraining creeds, in this case through an exploration of Zanzibari racism among Muslims and Africans. The late Ottoman Empire's own civilizing mission is also explored, as Selim Deringil reveals the manner in which Ottoman elites created new subalterns while rejecting their own imperial positioning.

Other essays of note pointedly address the violence endemic to imperial interaction. Richard Gott's essay "Shoot Them To Be Sure" questions the upbeat nature of imperial histories by illustrating the "routine horror of empire" somewhat skirted over by Oxford and Cambridge luminaries, such as William Roger Louis or C. A. Bayly (p. 109). Jonathan Hyslop brings whiteness studies into the picture by fixing the white working class as a unit of analysis, as he considers the extra-national pre-First World War ideology of white Labourism in Cornwall, Australia, and South Africa. Pieces by Richard Grove and Nancy Jacobs on environmental imperialism are particularly relevant and will likely inspire new work into the relationship between imperial power and the exploitation of land. Less discursive or theoretical studies such as these are particularly important as they serve to both justify newer epistemological-postcolonial approaches and preserve the need to draw on historical sources to write useful history.

The *Reader* ends with essays by Anthony Pagden and Partha Chatterjee. Pagden's broad historical overview of world empires from ancient Assyria to the present day might have been better placed at the beginning, as it puts many debates about empire's iniquities or virtues in a much larger historical context. Chatterjee concludes by reflecting on the important question of where the United States fits into the imperial conversation.

Between the hazy postcolonial and materialist antinomies of this debate, Cooper manages best to merge the merits and defects of both approaches. Cooper highlights the propensity for postcolonial scholars to fall victim to three flaws: "plucking" single sources to represent all of colonialism; leapfrogging from one period or place to another with questionable causation; and time-flattening, where a "reference to Hegel stands in for all European history!" (p. 81). Cooper argues that histories written without a multi-perspectival stance, as past histories arguably were, have properly been conceptually updated. But as he shows, historical analysis without the history is just analysis. This collection demonstrates that traditional historians have been forced to address gaps and biases. But Cooper inspires one to wonder if there has been an overcorrection. Perhaps the next generation of historians can avoid exceptionalist and blasé histories while remaining grounded in concrete historical analyses?

Though space of course is constrained, one or two short samples of "old imperial history," for contrast, could have substituted for what amounts to an unseen specter haunting these essays. This might have demonstrated that many from the Cambridge School are not so triumphalist or uncritical as often depicted. Perhaps an excerpt from the debate between Gyan Prakash and David Washbrook and Rosalind O'Hanlon could have been included to demonstrate the ire present in some debates.[1] Also, something by Ranajit Guha (such as *History at the Limit of World-History* [2002]) could have provided readers a sense of just how different new approaches from the Subaltern School are next to older histories. Still, Howe is not biased, and provides support for those disdainful of overly theoretical work by pointing to some of the gaping holes in arguments of interdisciplinary works inspired by

feminist theory, cultural and literary studies, poststructuralism, and the linguistic turn.

Ultimately, this volume raises the question of whether an old/new dichotomy still exists. Two decades of history graduate students have now been inundated with Joan Scott, Said, Foucault, and other discursive scholars of empire, begging the question of whether the newest batch of scholars even read much "traditional" history. Simultaneously, the wider public is privy to little of the newer conceptual work of recent decades (and cannot possibly understand much of it). Since much postcolonial scholarship is unlikely to trickle into the popular mind at pace, this leaves popular historians (and Glenn Beck) free to perpetuate tired tropes of Euro-American exceptionalism. It also leaves Howe's important introductory question, "What's the point? " hanging (p. 15). This volume though can perhaps inspire new students of history to hold back that ominous tide by combining new approaches with meaningful, precise historical prose.

Note

[1]. See, for instance, Gyan Prakash, "Can the *Subaltern* Ride? A Reply to O'Hanlon and Washbrook," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1 (January 1992): 168-184.

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

https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: John Corbally. Review of Howe, Stephen, ed., *New Imperial Histories Reader*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32358

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.