



Thomas Martin, Richard Toye. *Arguing about empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 288 S. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-874919-6.

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In *Arguing about Empire*, Martin Thomas and Richard Toye analyze political debates over empire and imperial ventures in both Britain and France from the high point of imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century through the beginnings of decolonization during the post-World War II era. Using a series of case studies, they look at the ways in which British and French politicians, officials, lobby groups, and experts deployed different types of rhetoric to define, defend, or attack imperial projects. They argue that these case studies reveal that even though British and French politicians and officials insisted on the differences between their respective imperial models, they used overlapping rhetoric to describe their imperial activities. They also contend that despite the rivalry, tension, and lack of solidarity between them, Britain and France primarily acted as “co-empires” for much of the period that the book examines.

As Thomas and Toye acknowledge in the introduction, imperial discourse has served as an important object of scholarly inquiry ever since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). But they note that most of the extant work has focused on the culture and literature of empire instead of on the rhetoric of high politics. The authors position rhetoric as a specific type of discourse defined loosely as “public speech.” Their

understanding of rhetoric’s operations thus owes much to post-Foucauldian understandings of the relationship between language and power; they argue that rhetoric “cannot be understood as an arrangement of tropes and figures” and that it should be seen instead as a “social phenomenon” (pp. 7-8). Throughout the book, they therefore reflect not only on the language and ideas mobilized by political actors in debates but also on the context in which these rhetorical devices were used and on how that context shaped the way that rhetoric was understood and received. In a similar vein, they argue that the rhetoric of empire did not solely reflect preexisting beliefs about empire; the deployment of different kinds of rhetoric contributed to broader processes that transformed imperial mindsets over time.

Thomas and Toye make clear from the beginning that the historical figures they are focusing on primarily consist of powerful and elite white men at the center of imperial decision making. And while each of their case studies looks at conflicts that took shape in the colonies, the rhetoric that they analyze was primarily deployed by politicians in Europe. The arguments over empire under analysis, then, are arguments between and among powerful metropolitan politicians and interest groups. Thomas and Toye argue that this perspective is critical to the broader project of re-

thinking empire as a category of analysis, because “what can be known of the history of empire was profoundly structured by the concerns of colonialists” (pp. 7-8). Because of the book’s emphasis on the social dimensions of rhetoric, however, it does situate these politicians’ arguments over empire within their understandings of broader public opinion. The book in fact argues that changing understandings of public opinion helped change the rhetoric of empire over time. Most importantly, by the 1920s, politicians were much more concerned about public opinion than they had been before, and they were increasingly aware that their audiences consisted not only of their domestic constituents and other European powers but also of their imperial subjects—and they modulated their rhetoric accordingly.

Thomas and Toye describe their approach to these arguments over empire not as a comparative history but as a *histoire croisée*, which looks at “the entanglement of the two empires, and the consequent inter-relatedness of imperial rhetoric” (p. 3). This approach, they argue, brings out the similarities and differences between French and British imperial rhetoric and highlights the interactive processes that shaped both. The book thus contributes to growing scholarly interest in the interconnections and mutual borrowings between different empires. To draw out these imperial entanglements, the authors focus on a series of controversies that brought the British and French empires into contact with one another. These controversies took shape primarily in North Africa and West Asia, the part of the world where France’s and Britain’s imperial relations were “most complicated” (p. 6).

The first two chapters focus on imperial events that created rhetorical conflicts over empire between British and French politicians. The first chapter looks at the French conquest of Tunisia in 1881 and the British conquest of Egypt in 1882, which, the book argues, led to a “rhetorical battle of wills between French and British vi-

sions of the ‘new imperialism’” (p. 19). But, as the chapter shows, even as French and British politicians used these conflicts to position themselves against one another, the rhetoric that they used to defend their imperial engagements functioned in similar ways. Both the French republican government and the British liberal government denied they were engaging in imperialism. French republicans claimed that they were forcing the Tunisian bey to govern responsibly, promoting order inside the country, and protecting the border with their Algerian colony, while British liberals used “liberal languages of contractual duty, international cooperation, hostility to despotism, the aspiration to national freedom, and the rule of (moral and actual) law” to defend their invasion of Egypt (p. 47). But the debates also brought out competing rhetorical strategies in both countries, as some politicians appealed to ideas of national prestige to defend imperial expansion. This rhetorical trope would recur more strongly in the Fashoda crisis, the subject of chapter 2. The authors claim that throughout the crisis, French and British politicians invoked a mixture of ideas about national dignity, legal rights, and moral superiority to defend their respective positions. Thomas and Toye also contend that politicians mobilized these claims not only against one another but also against their political rivals at home. In both chapters, Thomas and Toye thus highlight the ways in which imperial competition intersected with domestic political concerns, and they point toward the contradictions in the imperial rhetoric deployed.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911, which, the authors argue, marked a shift from competition and confrontation between British and French politicians to “the use of rhetoric as a means to cement the improving Franco-British relations signified by the entente” (p. 84). The Moroccan crises created rhetorical conflicts within France over the government’s policies toward the Moroccan sultan and also between France and Germany, but they led most

British politicians to invoke a model of international imperial co-operation to criticize what they saw as disruptive German aggression. As chapter 4 shows, this newfound rhetoric about imperial collaboration was tested by the Chanak crisis of 1922. The French and British governments had radically different goals in Anatolia in the wake of World War I, even if the basic problems that both countries were dealing with—overstretched empires, growing nationalist and anti-colonial movements—intersected. The British government’s insistence on intervening in Anatolia led to controversies within Britain and with France, as politicians on both sides of the channel worried about alienating their Muslim subjects. But as the authors show, even if the ensuing conflict led to “bitter rhetorical invective,” that invective largely remained behind closed diplomatic doors, because “Anglo-French co-imperialism in the Middle East” remained “a joint venture” (pp. 122, 127).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the effects of World War II on this model of French and British co-imperialism. As Thomas and Toye show, the collapse of France, the establishment of Vichy, and the creation of the rival Free French movement complicated French and British imperial relations. While the British government pursued contradictory policies toward both Vichy and the Free French, the rival French governments accused Britain of deliberately undermining the French empire. And at the same time, Vichy and the Free French used “competing rhetorics of empire” to position themselves against one another (p. 157). Throughout the war, British politicians sought to reassure the French that they did not seek to undermine their empire, but they were also willing “to speak the language of self-determination (selectively) at France’s expense” (p. 194).

The final chapter examines British and French collusion during the Suez crisis, and it shows that despite some mutual suspicion, the British and French governments continued to act as co-imperialists in the Middle East well into the

postwar era. In fact, the rhetoric that British and French politicians used to justify intervention in Egypt echoed the same kind of logics that both governments had invoked in the early 1880s. Once again, politicians in both countries denied that they were acting as imperialists. British politicians drew on the language of internationalism and highlighted the Egyptian government’s lawlessness to criticize its nationalization of the Suez Canal; the French similarly invoked the standards of international law and argued that the Egyptian government was threatening Algeria. The last chapter thus raises questions about the degree to which imperial rhetoric had changed over the last eighty years—even at a moment when decolonization was moving forward.

Thomas and Toye’s account of these arguments over empire is well balanced between France and Britain and deeply grounded in both the secondary source literature and in an impressive array of archival and newspaper sources. The case study approach enables Thomas and Toye to look deeply at the context in which the imperial rhetoric they are analyzing emerged and to highlight the diversity that characterized that rhetoric. At times, however, because the book devotes so much space to analyzing how different political actors reacted to imperial controversies, it can be difficult to see the larger patterns in the diverse types of rhetoric mobilized in some of the case studies. And because the case studies are centered on controversies that directly involved both Britain and France, the book also raises questions about how British and French rhetorics of empire functioned outside of moments of crisis that drew them both together. What did co-imperialism—and the rhetoric that both facilitated and obscured it—look like at more quotidian moments? It would also be interesting to see the degree to which the patterns that the book traces in elite political rhetoric were echoed in lower levels of imperial administration or in the colonies themselves. These questions are outside the scope of the book’s project, but they highlight the way in

which the authors have pointed toward avenues for future inquiry.

On the whole, *Arguing about Empire* is an ambitious volume that illuminates important intersections between the French and British empires and between French and British imperial rhetoric. It should engage anyone working on empire, European political culture, and comparative history.

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