Colonialism in Global Perspective

Kris Manjapra's engaging study of what he dubs 'racial capitalism' ranges widely across the globe, encompassing imperial expansion and activity from Vietnam to Uganda, from Australia to Canada. For Manjapra, the critical association of race and capitalism is the driving force of modern European colonialism, distinguishing it from other types of imperial expansion far more distinctively—and more politically oriented—than the maritime/territorial divide that has often been used to mark it out. Those who continue to understand de-colonization as a 'transfer of power' will find the book an uncomfortable read; they are, however, exactly the readers Manjapra's book desperately needs to reach.

Like his earlier Age of Entanglement (2014), Colonialism in Global Perspective is fearless in its reach, bringing together themes and issues hitherto seldom linked in its insistence on understanding a racialized colonial universe as insinuating itself into every aspect of human engagement and quotidian life. Thus we learn of the importance of port cities and of prisons, of the dazzling varieties of property ownership that encompassed not just land but bodies, too. Science and schooling, settlement and slavery are all discussed and melded together as part of a troubling, violent, and greedy entity that consumes and destroys in its quest for profit and power.

Manjapra's diligence in giving the work of indigenous scholars its rightful due is one of the highlights of this book. Too often such voices are forgotten but here they are paramount. Equally welcome is the insistence throughout the book on understanding the United States as a colonial power, both within its own territorial borders (themselves the product of colonial expansion) and beyond. The statement in his introduction that colonizer societies engage actively, even compulsively, in forgetting and in disavowal of their own violent pasts takes direct aim at the still-strong belief that the United States is, by definition, an anticolonial entity.

Manjapra is at his best when explaining some of the more complex legal and fiscal instruments whereby the tentacles of colonial power dug deep. His explanation of the evolution of land and property law, and of the creative uses of debt to further capitalist ends are amongst the clearest and most succinct such accounts I have read. These are complex issues which often befuddle scholars as well as readers, and Manjapra is to be congratulated on the clarity he brings to these sections of the work.
Inevitably there are a few omissions that took me by surprise, and I do not fault Manjapra for them; they doubtless reflect on my own preoccupations more than on his choices. Nonetheless, I wondered why the experiment of federation so popular in twentieth-century colonial politics did not feature in the chapter on space, given his emphasis on the remaking of space engendered by colonial rule. In the chapter on bodies, medical missions are wholly absent and a discussion of them would, perhaps, have nuanced his claims about health care practices and accessibility in the colonies. Indeed, this was one of the few moments in the book where I might question Manjapra’s analysis. His claims about healthcare for colonial subjects does not fully reflect the reality. At many colonial sites, the provision of medical care was predicated predominantly and often solely on there being a threat to resident white populations; where there was indigenous health care it was frequently the province of medical missionaries who were also often quite selective in the health care they provided. In short, access to healthcare for local people was not as widespread as the text perhaps implies.

My only real disappointment lay in the epilogue, which seemed to me to move away from the sweeping global promise of the book as a whole with its surprisingly America-centric optic. Having established so cogently that modern colonialism has always been global in its intent and its reach, the reversion to a US-focused conclusion took me by surprise. There are nods in the direction of resistance beyond America but the bulk of the chapter remains resolutely, and to my mind needlessly, focused on the US, largely ignoring the long-term effects and consequences of, for example, French and British colonial rule. This seems a missed opportunity, not least because so many of the tenaciously troubled political hot spots of the contemporary world owe their origin to the interference of these two imperial giants of the nineteenth century.

A few minor errors mar the text and should have been caught during copyediting; I expect better from as reputable a press as Cambridge. To identify the Mau Mau rebellions as Ugandan (p. 187) and to render the historian Daniel Immerwahr as David (p. 189) but then to get his name right in the endnotes may be small details but they are exactly the minutiae that copyediting is designed to catch.

This is a text that is accessible and clear, and will be of tremendous use in a classroom. It will make a fine text for courses on histories of imperialism and colonialism as well as histories of race. Although experienced historians of colonialism will not find much here that is new to them, they will find things brought together in a refreshing way that makes a persuasive case for the abiding relationship between capitalism, modern forms of colonialism, and race. Manjapra has produced a work that spells out the horrors and injustices of colonial politics in no uncertain terms, and leaves us in no doubt as to its continuing resonances in our allegedly postcolonial times.
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