

## The New Imperial Histories Reader

**Review Number:**

989

**Publish date:**

Monday, 1 November, 2010

**Editor:**

Stephen Howe

**ISBN:**

9780415424585

**Date of Publication:**

2009

**Price:**

£24.99

**Pages:**

480pp.

**Publisher:**

Routledge

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Barbara Bush

The *New Imperial Histories Reader* is part of a series of history readers aimed at the undergraduate/postgraduate market that have been published by Routledge over the past decade. The editor of this latest collection, Stephen Howe, is Professor of the History of Cultures of Colonialism at the University of Bristol and has made a noted contribution to the development of imperial history. His first book *Anti-colonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire; 1918–1964* (1) was one of the few pioneering studies that focused on opponents of empire and the links between empire and metropolis at a time when domestic and imperial history were still very much ‘separate spheres’. Since then he has published regularly on diverse aspects of imperial history including journal articles addressing the historiographic developments in imperial history since the 1980s. He is also an editor of the *Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History*.

The ‘postcolonial’ turn in imperial studies catalysed a major historiographical shift in the conceptualisation of empires and imperialism and provoked a fierce backlash from orthodox historians. The new imperial histories posed a challenge to orthodox historians on several grounds. First: the new histories were informed to a lesser or greater degree by the postmodernist theories associated with Michel Foucault and other French intellectuals such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida whose writings were also influential in energising the ‘new’ social and cultural history. Also influential were feminist theory, cultural and literary studies, and Edward Said’s critique of orientalism. Empiricist historians have always been suspicious of the theorizing and dense ‘jargon’ associated with other disciplines and were scathing about its intrusion into historical writing. Second: interdisciplinarity – the inclusion of psychoanalytical and literary frameworks of analysis into historical research for example – also generated criticisms of the new imperial history. Third: ‘old’ British imperial historians were eclipsed by the North American pioneers of the new imperial histories such as Antoinette Burton, Anne Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper whose work (represented in this volume)

influenced a generation of doctorate students in North America and Europe. Fourth: postcolonial theoretical frameworks enabled academics from the ex-colonised world, in particular those associated with South Asian subaltern studies, to make a more forceful, and critical, contribution to re-interpreting the imperial past that placed more emphasis on the formation of colonial and postcolonial identities.

Other works exist that have collated the most influential works pushing forward the boundaries of our understanding of empire, for example *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, edited by Gyan Prakash (1995); Catherine Hall's edited volume *Cultures of Empire: Colonisers in Britain and the Empire in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: a Reader* (2000) and, with Sonya O. Rose, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, (2006), and the third volume of Peter Cain and Mark Harrison's *Critical Concepts in Imperial History* (2001).<sup>(2)</sup> *The New Imperial Histories Reader* compliments and extends these existing works in that it includes 'notable examples of recent writing which either pursues issues neglected by most of that work, critiques elements of postcolonial writings or challenges the old/ new dichotomy' ( pp. 3-4). Historians who have been critical of, or eschewed, postcolonial theory such as Andrew S. Thompson, John Mackenzie and Bill Schwarz, suggests Howe, can be classed as 'new' imperial historians because they focus on social and cultural aspects of imperial history and/or the indivisibility of imperial and domestic histories. The new imperial history in the singular, he adds, is thus misleading and 'we should pluralise it and speak instead of fresh, creative histories of imperialism' (p. 3).

Thus his aims in compiling this reader are to gather together some of the most important, influential and controversial work that has been labelled 'new imperial history'. The articles selected reflect Howe's own interests and what he regards as the main preoccupations of the new imperial historians who have pushed forward the boundaries of imperial history. The idea of the new imperial history, stresses Howe, has been used in various ways but most of those using the 'tag' have 'shared a core understanding ... of what they mean by it', that is imperial history centered on 'ideas of culture ... discourse ... attention to gender relations and/ or to racial imaginings', the relationship between, knowledge, identity and power and the need to emphasise the impact of colonial cultures on both metropole and colonies as well as the importance of the legacy of imperialism. The new imperial historians have also queried 'the positioning of historians themselves', that is 'the desired, or expected, political or ethical effects of a scholar's own work' (p. 2).

In his introduction, Howe sketches some of the main lines of the key debates – 'lively, multifaceted and sometimes acrimonious' – over what imperial history 'is, has been, or should become' (p. 4). He does not explicitly take a position within these debates but acknowledges, rather enigmatically, that many of his conclusions are 'negative' in that these debates are deeply divisive. The key contentious issues he selects are: 1) Language - problems of contested terminology of empire, imperialism, colonialism etc. 2) Theories - challenges to the dominance of J. A. Hobson and Robinson and Gallagher from cultural analysis influenced by the writings of Edward Said – a particular *bête noir* of orthodox historians. 3) Power, knowledge and interest - approaches to understanding colonial knowledge and the power of discourse influenced by Foucault. 4) Colonialism and capitalism - challenges to the homogenising and Eurocentric analysis influenced by western Marxism and western concepts of modernity. 5) Ideologies - debates over the role of ideas, ideals and ideology in imperial expansions and rule. 6) Spaces and places (here the influence of empire on metropolises is flagged rather than work by postmodernist geographers on colonial landscapes and complex cultural borders between colonizer and colonized). 7) Nations or networks - cultural interconnections within and across empires and the formation of global networks as opposed to 'nation-centered historical models' favored by 'old' historians. 8) Collaboration – the degree to which colonialism depend on the collaboration of the colonized. 9) Resistance - the degree and nature of anti-colonial resistance that has generated highly politicized disputes between 'old and 'new' imperial historians. 10) Violence - perhaps the most emotive and contentious issue, concludes Howe, as it focuses on the role of repression and atrocities, including genocide, in the expansion and administration of empire. 11) Modernity and archaism - was colonialism a force of modernisation or did it encourage archaism, the persistence of traditional cultures? 12) 'What's the point?' Here Howe raises provocative questions that would have benefited from fuller discussion such as why study empire or colonialism at all and how do studies of imperialism relate to

the present? Some indication of which articles included in the reader addressed these key areas of controversy and how they link to the thematic organisation of the book would have strengthened this section of the introduction.

The reader includes 30 articles that, in Howe's estimation, have expanded the boundaries of imperial history and is divided into 12 parts that reflect the main themes, theories, concepts and debates associated with the new imperial history. These are: 'Promoting and explaining the 'new imperial history'' (George Balandier, Antoinette Burton, Dipesh Chakrabarty); 'Intellectual battles and exchanges' (Frederick Cooper, Nicholas Dirks, Richard Gott); 'Influences from anthropology and psychoanalysis' (Bernard Cohn and Ashis Nandy); 'Imperial cultures and global networks' (Alan Lester, Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, Philip S. Zachenuk); 'Feminism, gender studies and histories of the body' (Ann Laura Stoler, Kathleen Wilson); 'Ecological history' (Richard H. Grove and Nancy J. Jacobs); 'Racial imaginings' (Tony Ballantyne, Jonathon Glassman, Jonathan Hyslop); 'The impact of colonialism's cultures on metropolises' (John M. Mackenzie, Wendy Webster, Andrew S. Thompson); 'Colonialism's afterlives' (Paul Gilroy, Bill Schwarz); 'Africa and the Caribbean' (Joan Dayan on Haiti, Deborah A. Thomas on Jamaica, E. S. Atieno Odhiambo on African historiography); 'Other empires, other histories' (Selim Deringil on the Turkish empire and Laurent Dubois on the relationship between France and its empire past and present) and, finally, 'New histories, new empires – and the 'colonial present'' (Anthony Pagden, Partha Chatterjee). Howe provides a succinct contextualization of each article in terms of its contributions to debates but, as a historian's background is important in critical historiography, some additional biographical information about the contributors would also have been helpful.

Howe is to be commended on choosing one of the early pioneers of new ways of interpreting imperialism, George Balandier, for the opening contribution. This brilliant essay, written in 1951, when colonialism was still a reality for millions, stressed the compelling need to consider the 'colonial situation' as 'a single complex, as a totality' (p. 30). Balandier's ideas were developed in engagement with other pioneering, if flawed, studies by French academics that opened up new ways of understanding colonialism, including Octavio Mannoni's *Psychologie de la Colonisation* (1950) and René Maunier's *Sociologie Coloniale* (1932). As a key influence on postcolonial studies, Franz Fanon may have also been included and in the section on 'racial imaginings' a contribution from Victor Kiernan would perhaps have been appropriate in recognition of his study *Lords of Human Kind* (1972) which pioneered insight into colonial mentalities and racial attitudes, a focus of the new imperial history, at a time when it was not fashionable.

Perhaps one of the pithiest contributions is Frederick Cooper's critique of the way certain strands of postcolonial studies prioritise critique over historical research and have 'turned centuries of European colonization overseas into a critique of the Enlightenment, democracy and modernity' (p. 78). His essay challenges Dipesh Chakrabarty's contention that Europe has claimed the concept of modernity as its own and concludes that his arguments for provincialising Europe by making its history particular, rather than universal, are flawed and contradictory. The juxtaposing of articles in which authors take opposed positions is also found in the final section on the 'colonial present'. Anthony Pagden refutes the conceptualisation of the USA as an American empire whereas Partha Chatterjee takes the opposite view arguing that the new global order is imperial in nature and the USA uses similar justifications for interventions as did the British in the 19th century.

Also included in the reader are examples of new areas of enquiry stimulated by the new imperial history, such as studies of ecological history and empire, and aspects of the imperial past that have been revitalized, namely the colonies of British settlement, neglected by the old imperial history but now reconceptualised as the British world. Jonathan Hyslop, in his illuminating study of the imperial working class in Britain, Australia and South Africa before 1914 illustrates the interconnections across this British world and the construction of 'whiteness' or white labourism. He defines this as a 'weird combination of racism and egalitarianism' (p. 259) most aptly demonstrated in the slogan of white workers in the 1922 white miner's strike on the South African Rand - 'Workers of the World Unite and fight for a White South Africa' (p. 268). This article effectively illustrates some of the key preoccupations of the new imperial history, including interconnections between metropole and colonies and relationships between racism and imperial

power.

Some of the most interesting and challenging articles address the legacies of empire and its impact on black identities in Britain and the Caribbean. These include Paul Gilroy's critique of the consistent whitewashing of the darker parts of Britain's imperial past, including the depth and extent of racism. Referring to a 'mourning' or melancholia that prevents Britain from moving on to a healthier society he concludes that 'much of this embarrassing sentiment is today held captive by an unhealthy and destructive post-imperial hungering for renewed greatness (p. 331). His contribution is complimented by studies of the persistence of empire in popular consciousness in post-Second World War Britain by John Mackenzie and Wendy Webster. Webster demonstrates how popular imperial consciousness, and the racism that contributed to it, was reinforced by 'coloured' immigration to Britain, regarded as a threat to Englishness, and depictions of empire (Malaya, Kenya etc) in colonial war films of the 1950s. The inclusion of articles by Bill Schwarz on decolonization, migrant identities and West Indian political activism in Britain and Deborah Thomas on black identity in Jamaica 1888–1998 provide a counterbalance to these studies of empire in white British culture. Both emphasise the diasporic influences on the development of black consciousness as well as the way in which colonial cultures are mediated and contested.

In this eclectic collection, there are, of course, omissions – Robert Young on 'white mythologies', John and Jean Comaroff on anthropology and history and the nature of colonial societies in Southern Africa, Jan Nederveen Pietersie on the dialectic between power and resistance, Catherine Hall on cultures of colonialism and Mary Louise Pratt on early colonial encounters. Also missing are key debates on strategies of governance and cultural imperialism which draw on Gramscian theories of hegemony and resistance. Indeed, resistance is not dealt with in depth and there is little on the ways in which empire is remembered and/or represented in museums and art. Latin America is barely touched on and the Caribbean and Africa are only nominally represented, as are other empires. The section on gender is rather restrictive. It includes an influential article by Ann Laura Stoler on the importance on gender and racial hierarchies in the maintenance of imperial orders and Kathleen Wilson's essay provides insight into British seamen's negative perceptions of Polynesian masculinity during Captain Cook's eighteenth century voyages. But what about Mrinalini Sinha's work on colonial masculinities and Reina Lewis' pioneering research into gender and orientalism? The concluding section, 'New histories, new empires' is only partially representative of the upsurge of literature addressing the new imperialism. (3) However, given the scope of imperial history and editorial restrictions such omissions are understandable.

In many ways the new imperial history is no longer new. Has it now had its day? In the past decade, the emphasis has shifted away from imperial history *per se* to examining the links between imperialism and globalization. (4) There has been a rearguard action against the 'political correctness' of post-colonial perspectives and negative interpretations of imperialism exemplified in Niall Ferguson's popularization of a more orthodox, and positive, reprise on Britain's empire and its ending. We could argue that conventional historians have won the day reflected in a revival of interest economic and business histories and the relationship between the military and the empire. (5) Yet, in retrospect, the 'postcolonial turn' was vital in moving debates. The pioneers of the new imperial history prompted creative historical explorations and opened up new interdisciplinary perspectives that went beyond the bounds of conventional imperial histories and thus contributed significantly to a revival of interest in imperialism. Its conceptual framework and preoccupations have been highly influential, despite its critics, and continues to influence histories that explore new aspects of the relationship between empire and metropole. (6) The new imperial histories also provided 'post-colonial' African, African-Caribbean, African American Latin American and Asian intellectuals and political activists with a conceptual framework that enabled them to challenge contemporary racism and global inequalities. As Dale Kennedy stressed, developments in imperial history stimulated by post-colonial theory reinvigorated imperial studies and took it in new directions, raising provocative questions about power, culture and resistance in understanding the nature of colonial rule. (7)

The impact of the new imperial histories has been such that most undergraduate and postgraduate students studying imperial, African, Caribbean, Asian, Latin American, and British and European history have some

familiarity with these new historiographical developments. This new reader will undoubtedly find a market on both sides of the Atlantic, in Australasia and amongst European students studying imperialism. Despite some omissions, it provides wide-ranging insight into the diverse studies that can be classed as new imperial histories and will prove very useful for those who teach courses on the historiography of imperial history and for postgraduate students with a specialist interest in 19th- and 20th-century imperialism. *The New Imperial Histories Reader* effectively demonstrates major historiographic shifts away from the old and somewhat stale debates about imperialism. It illustrates how imperialism remains a complex and messy concept that defies historiographical compartmentalisation and will continue to generate historical debate. As Anthony Hopkins observed in the late 1990s new approaches to imperial history ensured there was no going back to the old debates and the way forward was to integrate less fashionable branches of history, such as economic history, with more fashionable cultural histories informed by post-colonial theory.<sup>(8)</sup> As Stephen Howe concludes in his introduction, the future lies not with the ‘new imperial history’ *per se* but with new histories of empires and imperialisms, some of which are ‘not entirely new but rather renewals of the old’ that it has stimulated (p. 16).

## Notes

1. Stephen Howe, *Anti-colonialism in British Politics: The Left and the End of Empire; 1918-1964* (Oxford, 1993).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash (Princeton, NJ, 1995); *Cultures of Empire: Colonisers in Britain and the Empire in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: a Reader*, ed. Catherine Hall (Manchester, 2000) and, with Sonya O. Rose, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006), and the third volume of *Imperialism (Critical Concepts in Historical Studies)*, ed. Peter Cain and Mark Harrison (London, 2001).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For instance David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, 2004); Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford, 2004).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See *Globalization in World History*, ed. , Anthony Hopkins (London, 2002).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Examples include Nicholas White, *Business, Government and the End of Empire: Malaya, 1942–57* (Oxford, 1996); Ashley Jackson *War and Empire in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean* (London, 2001); Bruce Collins, *War and Empire: The Expansion of Britain, 1790–1830* (London, 2010).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Most recently, *Accountancy and Empire: The British Legacy of Professional Organisation*, ed. Chris Poullaos and Suki Sian (New York, 2010).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Dane Kennedy, ‘Imperial history and post-colonial theory’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24, 3 (1996), 345–63.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Anthony G. Hopkins, ‘Back to the future: from national history to imperial history’ in *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), 203–4.[Back to \(8\)](#)

### Other reviews:

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/989#comment-0>

### Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5095>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>