Of the historians of politics in the late colonial and revolutionary period in American history, Jack P. Greene stands as one of the leading figures of the last half century. His *Quest for Power* (1963) examined the internal politics of England’s southern American colonies, while his *Peripheries and Center* (1986) offered a structural interpretation of British imperial politics defined by the relationship between the metropolitan center and the colonial periphery.(1) Two years later, Greene returned to the internal development of the colonies in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1988), which examined the internal social development of the colonies.(2) These, and Greene’s other scholarship on the reception of English political ideas and institutions into the colonial environment, can be rivalled by few other historians for both acuity and historiographical influence. It is for these reasons that I received my copy of *Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism* with great anticipation.

With *Evaluating Empire*, Greene shifts his focus from the periphery back to the metropolitan centre, with the goal of better understanding how metropolitans thought about their relationship to their colonies. Greene’s objective is to consider ‘how metropolitan Britons spoke and wrote about the British Empire during the short eighteenth century, the early decades through the mid-1780s’. Greene’s methodological approach is ‘neither a history of ideas … nor a study of public opinion’ but instead ‘an analysis of the many discourses or languages that metropolitan Britons used to assimilate, characterize, and evaluate the significance of the
overseas empire’ and imperial policy, using ‘the principal of those languages as analytic organizing categories’ (p. x). In short, although Greene does not use the term, Evaluating Empire can best be termed a history of political rhetoric.

Greene structures the book with three chapters introducing the pro- and anti-imperial language sets, followed by five chapters applying these language sets to metropolitan debate over India (chapter four), the West Indies and Africa (chapter five), North America (chapter six), Ireland (chapter seven), and the rump empire after the American War of Independence (chapter eight). Within each chapter, Greene compares the pro- and anti-imperial arguments, making particular use of the ‘language of alterity’ by which metropolitans distanced themselves from the colonials whose moral standards had degenerated within the uncivilized imperial setting.

The languages developed by the proponents of empire included languages of ‘commerce’, ‘liberty’, ‘security’, ‘maritime supremacy’ and ‘imperial grandeur’ that emphasized the benefits which empire brought to Britain. Languages developed to criticize the empire included the languages of ‘alterity’, ‘humanity’, ‘oppression’, and ‘justice’, as well as re-appropriation of languages such as ‘liberty’, emphasizing the moral costs empire brought to Britons at home and abroad. The language of alterity is the most interesting of the languages that Greene proposes, partly because it is far more distinctive than any of the others. Metropolitans who used the language of alterity portrayed the colonies as ‘social quagmires’ with a ‘self-indulgent population of independent masters’ of slaves, societies ‘that were out of control’ and were ‘deviants from English social norms’ (pp. 59–62). Greene devotes an entire chapter to the language of alterity, in contrast to the amalgamation of the other languages into their pro- and anti-imperial chapters.

Greene maintains that 1763 was a decisive turning point in the debate over empire, after which the languages critical of empire became more prevalent. This was due to ‘a growing familiarity with the character of overseas territories and after the Seven Years’ War’, which ‘produced a substantial critique of empire deriving from a widespread and deep revulsion against the behaviors exhibited by many groups of British peoples overseas’. While Greene maintains focus on 1763, he acknowledges that the critical languages had deeper origins in the ‘ubiquitous language of alterity or otherness … that predisposed metropolitans to be antisettler’ (p. xii).

I will not attempt to review each of the five chapters, partly because they are so similar in their broad contours. Greene is meticulous in quoting and paraphrasing from 18th-century texts, but this is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, the reader is left with no questions as to the language involved (typically the words ‘justice’, ‘grandeur’, etc. are taken directly from the text) and how the writers presented their views and interacted with each others’ arguments. On the other hand, this great mass of information sometimes overwhelms the internal narrative or argument of each chapter. While Greene repeatedly makes the case that the way in which empire was debated underwent a shift after 1763, I was often left unsure as to what exactly was responsible for making the languages of humanity and justice ‘supply the central vocabulary for what amounted to a fundamental reevaluation of empire’. While Greene credits the ‘wide-ranging political discussion’ over East India Company rule in Bengal for having ‘supplied the context for and helped to stimulate similar examinations of the behavior of Britons in other situations in the overseas empire’ (p. 121), this does not fully explain why post-1763 critiques emerged simultaneously and thus leaves unanswered one of the most tantalizing questions of the book – why metropolitans began criticizing their empire at the same time as did their American colonial subjects.

There are two broad criticisms I wish to make of this book, relating to its source base and its methodology. Regarding the source base, Greene is upfront about his lack of consistent criteria for selection of primary sources, but this is a significant weakness. Greene draws on parliamentary speeches and ‘contemporary metropolitan, including Irish, publications’. This includes pamphlets but for some reason excludes newspapers and magazines, which ‘have been used sparingly and unsystematically’. The inclusion of Irish pamphlets is confusing since Ireland is treated as a non-metropolitan region in the analysis; Greene excludes publications of other non-metropolitan territories such as America, ‘unless they were originally printed somewhere in Britain or republished there’. The contradictory use of Irish pamphlets and the disregard for
other printed materials no doubt stems from Greene’s lack of ‘some principle of selection’, and he admits that ‘having never managed to find or invent one during more than a decade of research, I have simply proceeded by working through every relevant source I could find’ (p. x). This rings hollow, and Greene confesses that ‘I have missed a number of’ sources. For a book that stakes its claim to originality on being ‘the first to treat this subject comprehensively’, these oversights and omissions are too large to ignore.

My other concern is the methodological approach of using the ‘languages’ to analyze political rhetoric. The language of alterity is the best established, and there is strong textual justification for other languages such as justice, humanity, and commerce. But at times, these languages become muddled and the nomenclature used to describe them is inconsistent. The ‘language of security’ sometimes morphs into the anachronistic ‘language of national security’ (pp. 274–5), and the ‘language of naval supremacy’ really doesn’t seem like a rhetorical style at all. It is in these cases where Greene’s rhetorical categories seem artificial and imposed by the scholar on his source material. With such shifting definitions, the languages become whatever they are needed to be in a given passage.

The confusion over language categories is unfortunate, because Greene is onto something important. Although Greene denies that ‘the critics [or] the exponents of empire shared a political affiliation or formed an intellectually coherent group’ (p. xiii), the later chapters strongly suggest just such a connection. I do not think it is an accident that the period of increased and coherent criticism of empire coincides almost exactly with the period that the Whig Party was in parliamentary opposition. It raises an important question: how much of the post-1763 rhetorical shift was due to broad-based skepticism of imperialism, and how much was it either the ideology or the opportunism of Whigs who were now in the Opposition? Much of the criticism of empire seems to have come from the Whig Opposition criticizing Tory Administration policies in America, Ireland, and India. Greene specifically links criticism of empire to the Opposition on more than one occasion, including the debates over Irish trade (pp. 264–5), the American Revolution (pp. 210–28), and the Quebec Act (pp. 280–2). If criticism of empire overlapped significantly with party affiliation, then surely questions of the extent to which criticism of empire was an expression of Whig ideology or of opportunism should have been raised and answered.

Like Greene’s other works, Evaluating Empire is a book that probes an important question about the relationship between the imperial centre and peripheries: how the metropolitan decision-makers at the imperial center used language to shape the debate, and thus the policies, of the empire. At its best, Greene’s analysis is compelling and his reconstruction of parliamentary and pamphlet debates painstaking. Unfortunately, there are unexplained gaps in the source material that raise significant questions about the comprehensiveness of the research, and his methodological approach is interesting but questionable. At the very least, Greene has laid a strong foundation for future studies of the debate over empire, and contributed a new perspective to the existing literature.

Notes


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