

## The Trouble With Empire

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**Reviewer:**

Denise Gonyo

As Antoinette Burton points out in the introduction to her newest work, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism*, there has been no shortage of blockbusters about the British Empire to be found on the shelves of local booksellers. Many of these take for granted the rise and fall narrative of Empire. Take the subtitle, for example, of Philippa Levine's work *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset*.<sup>(1)</sup> Or Lawrence James's seminal work *Raj: The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*.<sup>(2)</sup> Burton takes on the grand narrative but aims to complicate this tradition by arguing that dissent, rather than 'Pax Britannica', was the main feature of the British Empire.

It is within this ambitious premise that Burton brings together trends in feminist and subaltern histories in order to complicate the historiographical narratives of British imperialism. The rise and fall view, she argues, has limits, and she intends to probe these limits. Her thesis is that its 'perpetual insecurity ... should drive big histories of modern British imperialism rather than serve merely as backdrop to the story of its rise and fall' (p. 4). Resistance was the norm rather than the exception: empire was not cyclical, nor could it escape the ongoing resistance and dissent that formed the empire. Imperial historians frequently analyse the colonial encounter in terms of negotiation, but the rise and fall narrative still persists. Burton goes beyond this model to analyse the 'trouble' inherent in all the colonies and territories.

*The Trouble with Empire* emerges from Burton's long history working with imperial narratives. Her work has typically focused on feminist colonial histories, often with a focus on India. More recently, her work has emphasised transnationalism, such as her article 'South Asian Women, Gender, and Transnationalism' in the *Journal of Women's History*

. Transnationalist themes are threaded throughout *The Trouble with Empire*, such as her examination of the boycotts in Cairo after the First World war that were modelled after Gandhi's anticolonial protest.

The book is broken down thematically to focus on the main elements of Pax Britannica: military, economic, and political. The time period covered by this text is between the onset of the American Revolution in 1776 and the 1930s and 1940s, a time frame that ends before the typical narrative of decolonisation. Within these chapters, Burton sets out her narrative challenges. She attempts to balance both a quantitative and qualitative approach by incorporating wide-ranging accounts of imperial dissent from across different cultures and histories, arguing that this method 'reveals both the commonalities among different forms of agitation and the structural weaknesses of imperial formations in situ' (p. 8). She is toeing a fine line by trying to draw similarities between very disparate peoples and cultures whilst trying not to homogenise or generalise. Simultaneously, she argues that her approach serves to illustrate the fractured and limited nature of Britain's imperial supremacy. Her focus is on the limits on the security of empire.

The first chapter dismantles the claims to imperial military dominance by focusing on imperial narratives that, read through Burton's lens, reveal the inherent tensions and uncertainty of Britain's military superiority. A large part of this section looks at Winston Churchill's *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, which was derived from his letters to the *Daily Telegraph*. Churchill documented his experiences with the Malakand forces, which took and held the Swat Valley region in India (now Pakistan) for a period in the summer and autumn of 1897. Burton connects the ways in which narratives such as Churchill's made clear the links between specific military victories and the stability of the entire Empire, and of Britain itself. She analyses Churchill's perceptions of the battle to reveal the undercurrent of vulnerability underneath the 'rhetoric of imperial expansion' that echoes 'several decades of conviction about the power of the civilizing mission to rationalize forward movement into new imperial possessions for the greater glory of the nation and the race' (p. 29). While victories were supposed to illustrate inherent British imperial and technological superiority, Churchill's text exposes a near-constant apprehension regarding the viability of capturing and holding this region. One of the most interesting parts in this section exposes how the victory was ultimately one that used forms of warfare generally considered primitive at that time. The Malakand forces achieved a form of victory not by technological or civilizational superiority but rather by the use of fire to destroy all the villages in the valley. As Burton demonstrates, the text reveals how the discourse of British imperial superiority was fractured at best. This section is somewhat heavy on Churchill's dialogue; other perspectives may add to the frame of reference for his text.

Burton further links the Malakand effort to two Afghan Wars between 1839 and 1842 and 1878 and 1880 in order to suggest that imperial victory was never certain, never a given, and this pattern was the same across geopolitical sites and time periods. In doing so, she teases out the difference between constant defence and victory. The Empire was characterised by a culture of risk, uncertainty, constant precariousness, and always subject to attack. Ultimately, she aims to dismantle the hegemonic construction of imperial superiority by arguing that its inevitability was by no means certain. Historians, furthermore, should not assume Britain's military dominance even during the so-called height of the Empire.

The next section moves to considerations of the economic basis for dissent and resistance, looking at strikes, boycotts, and other forms both within the imperial territories and in the metropole. In this chapter, she introduces the idea of using economic protest in order to shed light on British imperialism. Boycotts as a sign of economic power, and sabotage, desertion, and strikes as evidence of labour power were all used by colonial subjects in order to constantly unsettle imperial security. In one example, during the 1850s and 1860s, the Krobo group in Ghana cornered the market on palm oil, refusing to ship the product until they received fair market value from London merchants. It is at these points, where colonial agency is the focus of the work, where Burton's arguments are the strongest. She also incorporates some instances of the ways in which gender played an important and complex role in the economic unrest: she briefly brings up the example of Mary Muthani Nyanjiru, who joined a protest that shamed both local male leaders and British officials in 1922 Kenya. She removed her clothing, reportedly shouting 'You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let's get him!' (p. 105). She was shot and killed soon thereafter. Though these small but widespread forms of resistance did not

bring down the Empire, they illustrate its long term economic vulnerability across different regions and cultures. Burton also makes an intriguing link between this instability to the unrest at home in the heart of the empire. In 1919, soldiers from West Africa, South Asia, and the West Indies came to port towns across Britain, where white soldiers and workers had the prospect of competing for jobs with the newly arrived. Riots broke out and the press fanned the flames of fear. This link could have been expanded upon in greater detail to show how strongly instability across the empire was inextricably linked home.

In the final section, Burton looks at the disruption to the imperial political order, including the multiple insurgencies by individuals and movements that could 'provoke and disable, if not dismantle or overturn' (p. 146). Threaded through Burton's work is an attempt to de-centre certain touchstones of empire that are viewed as emblematic of British imperial power, specifically in terms of the perceived inevitability of Britain's military strength. Some examples examined include the 1857 Indian Rebellion or 'Mutiny' and the widespread unrest that occurred after World War I in 1919. She contextualises these events as part of a wider framework of colonial resistance. In the aftermath of the 1857 Rebellion, for instance, she calls attention to various forms of unrest and resistance that took place, such as boycotts and strikes on indigo plantations by ryots in the 1860s. This unrest reverberated throughout the Empire, including uprisings by Paul Bogle in Morant Bay, Jamaica, in 1865. This event led to brutal counterinsurgency. Burton also calls attention to another important narrative point that often arises in histories of imperialism: the Scramble for Africa in the 1880s. She brings up an important point that is often taken for granted when considering this era – that the Scramble was marked by a significant number of uprisings by figures such as Ahmed Urabi in Egypt and Danieri Basammula-Ekkere Mwanga II in the kingdom of Buganda. Urabi was the founder of an Egyptian nationalist party and firmly declared to Gladstone that England 'must keep within the limits of her jurisdiction' (p. 164). These powerful figures are an example of where the paradigm of hegemony does not necessarily hold up because they set the parameters of engagement.

By nuancing these narratives that have traditionally been seen as important markers of British imperialism, Burton opens up the possibility of reconsidering other events that have been taken for granted. For example, with her model, how do the patterns of decolonisation alter and shift? How can we reconsider the relationship between the East India Company in the eighteenth century until it was officially dismantled in 1877? The counter narratives that are presented, which illustrate the constant strife, uncertainty, and resistance in all areas, from economic to military to political, are the strongest point in this work. Her argument is at its best when she is unpacking specific instances and people, such as the indigo revolts that arose in India during the 1860s or the insurgent Ahmed Urabi in Egypt. She has opened a door to contextualise imperialism in a new way, leading us to reconsider the lens through which we view not only British colonialism but also, potentially, the imperial strategies of other countries such as Belgium and France.

Burton suggests that her model of viewing the British Empire through the lens of dissent would better lend itself to illustrating the agency of colonial subjects in their resistance, in all its forms, to imperial hegemony. This paradigm does not necessarily hold up upon a closer reading of the text. The structure of the work includes a large array of many figures and peoples without fully fleshed out information about the background, cultures, and context of these subjects. This strategy causes the figures and peoples to blur together with the effect that they all start to feel homogenous. There is a danger of homogenising very disparate groups of people where individual voices start to get lost. Even in the counter-narrative that Burton is offering here, the customs, cultures, and most of all the people and their dissents, boycotts, strikes, and violent actions become difficult to contextualise. Ultimately, Burton opens up fascinating potential new areas for scholarship to further explore colonial subjects' perspectives. Future research on these figures will shed further light on and enrich Burton's readings of archival resources.

Burton aims to provide a counter-narrative to histories such as Niall Ferguson's *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*. In doing so, she is bridging the gap between these more populist histories and scholarly works. New students of imperialism at the undergraduate level will enjoy this book as an introduction to British imperialism, while her nuancing of the narratives will appeal to a wider audience who may be

interested in histories of empire. At its core, Burton's work opens up key possibilities for alternative readings of British source material and also pushes forward fruitful opportunities for scholarship on the myriad dissenters, revolutionaries, and nationalists that she incorporates throughout her text.

## Notes

1. Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (London, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lawrence James, *Raj: The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (New York, NY, 1995). [Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

### Other reviews:

Foreign Affairs

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/2015-10-19/trouble-empire-challenges-modern-british-imperialism>

[2]

H-Empire

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[2] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/2015-10-19/trouble-empire-challenges-modern-british-imperialism>

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