Imperialism and Postcolonialism

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Some historical and related scholarly fields appear—not always for any very obvious reason—to generate considerably more introductory, overview, and student-oriented books than do others. This has certainly seemed to be the case for both the territories that Barbara Bush seeks, with considerable success, to bring together here. There have been numerous surveys of imperial expansion and/or contraction, sometimes comparative, some centred solely on the British Empire, and some focused specifically on summarizing rival theories of imperialism. A more recent, but even more flourishing, genre has been the survey, aimed at students, aiming to chart the field of colonial and postcolonial cultural studies, ordinarily with a strong emphasis on a handful of particularly influential theorists: Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The first set of introductory texts has tended to be written mainly by historians and aimed at history students, the second to come from, and be addressed to, people in literature departments. In both cases, one’s impression (although this would be hard to show statistically) is that the ratio of such elementary-level works to ones of more original, specifically-focused research is notably higher than in most academic fields. This might not be thought an especially healthy situation. It is certainly one that poses problems for the teacher trying to decide which of these introductions to recommend, or the student wondering which to buy.

Endeavors to survey and analyze the literatures of imperial history and of (post)colonial studies together, however, have been very few, and have mostly come from locations solidly emplaced in one or the other of these sporadically-hostile subdisciplines. There have been far more negative polemics—latterly echoed within historical studies in polarization between ‘new’ and ‘old’ imperial histories—than there have been attempts at either synthesis or reconciliation.

Barbara Bush’s Imperialism and Postcolonialism is thus a rather more innovative work than most in this rather crowded field. It brings together critical discussion of a huge range of works and ideas both in ‘traditional’ imperial history and in the newer genres of colonial and postcolonial studies. The scope and ambition involved are extremely impressive. So too are many, indeed most, aspects of the execution. The book is clearly and accessibly written, but without blatantly oversimplifying or short-circuiting the often complex debates with which it deals. Bush has consulted an imposing mass of relevant texts in numerous specialist areas, and includes an excellent, detailed guide to further reading. If the reviewer must also note
some significant flaws, these should be seen as blemishing, but not disfiguring, a very accomplished and welcome initiative.

The book’s main aim is described as being, ‘to provide a broad overview of the dynamics of theoretical change and address key questions of how and why conceptualizations of imperialism have changed over time’ (p. 45). Bush thus several times underlines the complex, sometimes highly-charged issues of definition which cluster around most of the relevant key terms, perhaps above all ‘imperialism’ itself. She does not, however, offer a particular or distinctive definition herself—an abstention which her colleague Peter Cain in his Foreword to the book thinks wise, but which others may find a little frustrating.

The main focus is on cultural histories, and on ideologies and representations of empire, which, as Bush notes, have generated the largest and most vigorous literature in the field in the past few decades, with comparatively little space devoted to the older debates on imperialism’s economic balance-sheets, and strikingly little on forms of state and methods of rule. The choice of emphasis has a clear and compelling rationale, to be sure; but it does tend to induce an overemphasis, perhaps, on the novelty of some themes in recent writing, and to miss or understate certain earlier currents. Where she says that postcolonial theory, ‘has addressed issues not formerly interrogated’ (p. 55), none of the themes she then lists is, in fact, entirely novel. Indeed, for many of them there have been unjustly neglected precursors to the explosion of new work in the past couple of decades. One might better, more modestly, say that many of these were issues which had been comparatively under-investigated. There is a stronger case for urging the importance of transdisciplinary perspectives in much such writing: it is perhaps in this regard more than any other that theories of colonial discourse and postcoloniality reinvigorated the historical study of empires. Among the most pleasing features of Bush’s book itself is the extent to which, though her own background is firmly within history, she ranges across disciplines as well as centuries and continents.

The chapter on the contradictory relationship of imperialism to ideas of modernity is especially strong, as in many respects is that on ‘culture and imperialism’—although in the latter there are some incautiously sweeping claims about, for instance, ‘the African perspective’ on anthropology (supposedly uniformly hostile: pp. 129–30). The scattered references to specific cultural productions—novels, music, and especially cinema—are often engaging and show a striking breadth of interest—albeit that Bob Marley’s ‘Redemption Song’ is given two different erroneous titles in two different places (pp. 136, 193). Issues of gender in their relation both to imperial ideologies and to anticolonial resistance are given substantial and thoughtful attention, as would be expected in light of the author’s prior specialism and important earlier work in this sphere. Similarly, the discussion of imperialism’s cultural representations—especially in their impact on domestic British culture, where Bush provides a deft and judicious summary of a hotly-debated subject—is among the best brief overviews of that area now available.
There are also three ‘case studies’ of imperialism in action: looking more closely at Ireland (where much of Bush’s discussion is actually centred on the debate over whether Ireland should indeed aptly ‘belong’ in comparative studies of empire or colonialism at all), China and Japan, and British-ruled Africa. It is a pity that the most detailed of these case studies, that on Ireland, is marred by some surprisingly elementary factual slips, as with calling the Battle of the Boyne a ‘victory of the Orangemen over the Catholics’ (p. 75: the Orange Order was founded over a century later, while Catholics fought on both sides at the Boyne); that ‘in 1798, the British killed 50,000 United Irishmen’ (p. 73: the total death-toll on all sides and at all hands of the ’98 Rising was perhaps 20,000); that ‘the Fenians attempted an uprising on mainland Britain in February–March 1867’ (p. 71: this considerably overstates the abortive Fenian conspiracy in England during February, while overlooking the more significant effort in Ireland itself the following month); and that the 1840s Famine only seriously affected the western half of Ireland (p. 75: recent research on, for instance, Ulster’s ‘hidden famine’ has shown how erroneous this received picture really is). To say that, ‘the Liberal government encouraged the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1912’ (p. 74) betrays a more fundamental misunderstanding of the politics of the period. It should perhaps be added that in her Irish excursion Bush is excessively generous towards the present reviewer’s own work on this topic, often attributing to him arguments which he was far from originating.

The other ‘case studies’—one comparing China and Japan, one very fleetingly addressing British Africa—appear less error-prone, perhaps just because, in covering such vast regions so briefly, they make fewer specific empirical claims. Elsewhere in the book there are a few further slips: to write, for instance, of ‘the Mexican (Zapata) revolution 1910–17’ (p. 37) is at best an over-hasty way of describing or alluding to the hugely complex series of events in which Emiliano Zapata was neither main initiator nor sole leader. In the main, however, Bush’s is a remarkably sure-footed survey in terms of factual reliability as well as conceptual clarity.

The numerous great strengths of Bush’s work are, though, rather less evident in her last chapter on imperialism and globalization today. Indeed, when she moves, here, to the very recent past, the claims are sometimes uncomfortably sweeping. Again the breadth of reading is impressive, but the coverage is increasingly truncated, almost breathless, and the ‘summaries’ (often in a single phrase) of others’ arguments considerably more sketchy than had been the case in earlier chapters. In these last pages, the authors singled out for mention or sketchy summary are overwhelmingly radical critics of Western or US power: the degree of balance between contending viewpoints pursued elsewhere in the book is here seemingly abandoned. For example, there are over-confident allusions to a current ‘recolonization by the West’ in Africa (twice in rapid succession at pp. 188, 189 and several times elsewhere, for example at p.25). There have certainly been arguments for such a thing, but her phrasing seems to suggest an established fact on the ground, and it is hard to see that there have actually been clear examples of that in operation—so far. Somewhat similarly, Bush urges that: ‘Cultural differences have also been encouraged as part of a global strategy for world management, to fragment any forces of opposition’ (p. 198). So stark a claim, implying a coherent and conscious logic of global domination—although without identifying the supposed authors of this logic—is at odds both with the emphasis elsewhere in Bush’s concluding chapters on globalization’s complex and contradictory character, and with the book’s general tenor of seeking to describe rather than adjudicate politically-charged academic debates.

Treatment of the issue which has been possibly the most ideologically charged of all relevant themes, that of a supposed ‘clash of civilizations’ is still more unsatisfactorily truncated. Bush suggests that: ‘In the postmodern world, religion and belief have become more central, in contrast to the secularity of the modern period’ (p. 211). Too much is assumed or elided here, even apart from the fact that elsewhere Bush had neither much used nor seemed much to like the concept of the postmodern. When she concludes that: ‘This chapter has established a close, and often confusing, link between capitalism, globalization and imperialism’ (p. 212), one feels forced both to assent, and ungenerously to think that her too-hasty gallop through some of the relevant debates has failed to alleviate the reader’s potential confusion about these issues and concepts.
This contrasts disappointingly with the success which much else in the book achieves in clearly mapping some very complex debates.

This is, then, an erratic book: weakest where it ventures into discussion of very recent developments, of globalization and the renewed debates on American ‘empire’; far better in outlining broadly cultural theories and explanations of nineteenth and twentieth century imperialisms. On the latter, and in its resourceful bringing together of ‘old’ imperial-history and ‘new’ cultural studies literatures on these themes, it can be recommended to students as perhaps the best among numerous recent, partly competing texts. It will also give more specialist readers much to think about and to learn from.

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