

1 | Geography, imperialism and colonialism: concepts and frameworks

Aims

We have been witnesses of one of the most remarkable episodes in the history of the world. During the past eight years we have seen the bulk of the one barbarous continent [Africa] parcelled out among the most civilised Powers of Europe. (Keltie 1893: 1)

While these obscure struggles, often a grotesque mixture of savagery and farce, were fought out within the cultural context of traditional Zambesi society, the world outside was rapidly changing. The explosive industrialization of Europe and the United States spread its influence until eventually the armed struggles on the Zambesi became absorbed and transformed by the global economic revolution of nineteenth-century imperialism. (Newitt 1995: 298)

This opening sentence of a book on *The Partition of Africa* by J. Scott Keltie (Assistant Secretary to the Royal Geographical Society) gives a perspective on some of the assumptions underpinning the ambitions, failures and successes of European powers in their overseas territories in the late nineteenth century, articulated in this example by a distinguished senior member of a major geographical society. The words ‘barbarous’ and ‘civilised’ suggest assumptions about cultural superiority that were part of the dissemination of European ‘civilisation’ overseas, and the words ‘parcelled out’ imply an almost innocent diplomatic game. Keltie’s book is, in fact, a helpful and generally even-handed chronicle of the history and geography of the ‘scramble’ for Africa, but it was written within a limited conceptual and explanatory framework. The second quotation, from Malyn Newitt’s *History of Mozambique*, is a creditable summary, especially in the phrase ‘a grotesque mixture of savagery and farce’, of many experiences of imperialism and colonialism, and the increasingly global contexts in which they were enacted. The ideologies, processes and experiences of imperial and colonial expansion (and ultimately retraction) were in fact extremely complex, changed through time, and varied within and between colonial powers, the areas to which they laid claim, and their populations.

The purpose of this book is to identify and explain some of the main processes, geographical contexts and outcomes of European imperialism and colonialism within the time-frame c. 1880–1960. It draws on the traditions and outputs of historical and human (and to some extent physical) geography, and on a wide variety of works of historical scholarship. Its thematic focus is on the historical geographies of significant components of imperial and colonial change. These include: conceptual frameworks; the nature, timing and places of European and indigenous experience; assessments of numbers, compositions and movements of populations; the evaluation and appropriation of rights of use of indigenous land; links with the production of geographical knowledge (by exploration, mapping and the activities of learned societies); cultural assumptions and ‘civilising’ missions; environmental influences and interactions; communication and transport networks; metropolitan and colonial towns and cities; geographies of production and resource exploitation; and decolonisation.

A major component of this book is an attempted comparison between the historical geographies of the imperial and colonial experiences of the major European powers. While much of its content is about the British empire, it seeks, probably for the first time in a work on historical geography, to highlight and contrast the imperial and colonial experiences of the other powers such as Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy, and in some measure Russia, and to make some comparison with the late developers in the imperial field, notably Japan and the United States. It seeks also to hear the voices of the indigenous populations of the countries subject to imperial policy and colonial management, and also of those more generally marginalised by these processes.

The book is aimed at a broad target, including undergraduate and graduate students and academic teachers and researchers in geography, history, and related subjects, together with a wider-ranging audience interested in imperial and colonial processes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Historical geography

The intellectual tradition on which the book is based – historical geography – incorporates reconstructions of changes in geographical spaces and places in the past. Historical geography has a long history dating back to at least the seventeenth century in Europe, but its more modern form developed from the beginning of the twentieth century. Historical geography

incorporates a wide range of the perspectives and analytical tools of geography in identifying and understanding aspects of past life and environments. These include the character and construction of places, spaces and landscapes, the dynamics of human and environmental change, the appropriation and management of resources, geopolitical issues and conflicts including the determination of boundaries, the dissemination of cultural and belief systems, the varied roles of maps and mapping (as records, and tools of power), the nature of human settlements, gender and post-colonial perspectives, economic and trading links, modernity, cultures of exploration and ‘discovery’, the creation and development of geographical knowledge, and the roles of institutions and individuals in shaping the experiences of particular peoples and places. Most of these are covered in the individual chapters of this book. In its various thematic and regional narratives, sources used include maps, population data, field and landscape evidence, records of urban and rural development, national archives and official accounts, accounts of travel and exploration and the records of institutions such as geographical societies, and evidence of environmental change, by both human and natural agencies. This is not, however, the place for a reappraisal of the development of the subject and its many insights, for there are many useful and relevant recent accounts of its evolved present character and linked ideas (Butlin 1993; Graham and Nash 2000; Blunt and McEwan 2002; Baker 2003, 2005, 2007; Lambert and Lester 2006).

Different countries have their particular traditions and emphases within the sub-discipline of historical geography, and the geographical analysis of imperial and colonial issues within Europe started earlier in Britain and France than it did in Germany and Italy, for example, a feature reflective of the chronologies and trajectories of imperialism and colonialism in these countries. There is now, of course, a wider global comparison of these and related experiences, notably decolonisation.

Historical and cultural geographers have played a major part over the past two decades in the advancement of research and publications on imperialism and colonialism, and have located their research in both imperial metropolises and heartlands and distant ‘peripheries’, increasingly framed in the context of postcolonial approaches, and therefore offering new and different perspectives on the contrasting and complementary roles of actors from different cultural bases. Alison Blunt has emphasised the significance for the geographer of ‘the spatiality of colonial power and its forms of knowledge, the spatial politics of representation and the material effects of colonialism in different places at different times’ (Blunt 2005: 177),

and has categorised the main contributions as cultures of imperialism, geographical research and education, whose major themes include: 'geographies of encounter, conquest, colonisation and settlement'; 'geographies of colonial representation in both written and visual forms'; 'the production of space in colonial and postcolonial cities'; 'the gendered, sexualised and racialised spaces of colonialism, colonial discourse and postcoloniality'; and 'geographies of migration, diaspora and transnationality' (Blunt 2005: 178).

Much of this work by geographers investigates the processes of production of colonial and postcolonial spaces. It has ranged from studies of individuals, households and families, through to trans-global and trans-imperial experiences by different kinds of colonised and coloniser. For the most part these studies are linked to imaginative interpretations of a wide range of evidence and representations, and fruitful analyses of situated experiences are examined within broader theoretical perspectives.

In recent times historical geography has made use of artistic and literary representations of geographical and landscape change, together with historical photographs, the records of the experience of individuals and of ethnic groups who interacted with colonisation processes, gender perspectives, the deconstruction of the symbolic meanings of maps, and evaluations of environmental interaction. Its practitioners have focused strongly on the regional and global experiences of imperialism and colonialism and their political and geopolitical contexts. Much of this research has been linked to studies of the histories of geographical thought and also to a wide range of theory (Graham and Nash 2000; Blunt and McEwan 2002; Cosgrove 1999, 2008; Driver 2001; Driver and Martins 2005; Harley 1998; Livingstone 1992, 2003; Withers 2001; Heffernan 1998c; Ryan 1997; Brayshay and Cleary 2002; Lambert and Lester 2006; Stafford 1999; Legg 2007; Powell 2000, 2004, 2007).

Strong links have also been made by geographers to contemporary issues of imperialism and colonialism. Powerful polemic narratives and post-colonial analyses of past and present problems in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been articulated, for example, by Derek Gregory, who has used a wide range of theory to engage with the profound, contorting and continually tragic events and processes of Western imperialism, notably in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 (Gregory 2004). Gregory's

purpose has been to try to understand what it was that those events in New York City and Washington triggered and, specifically, how they came to be shaped by

a cluster of imaginative geographies into more or less *public* cultures of assumption, disposition and action ... how did those imaginative geographies solidify architectures of enmity that contrived to set people in some places against people in other places? (Gregory 2004: 27–8)

Gregory (2004: 8) cites Nicholas Thomas on the significant links between culture and imperialism:

colonialism is not best understood primarily as a political or economic relationship that is legitimized or justified through ideologies of racism or progress. Rather, colonialism has always, equally importantly and deeply, been a cultural process; its discoveries and trespasses are imagined and energized through signs, metaphors and narratives; even what would seem its purest moments of profit and violence have been mediated and enframed by structures of meaning. (Thomas 1994: 2)

What those structures of meaning entail, and what forms they take, are questions to which answers are still being sought.

Ideas, processes, events and interactions operating within the complex kaleidoscope of imperialism and colonialism have been evaluated with a view to understanding what David Lambert and Alan Lester have called ‘putative root causes’ (the large canvas on which this book is produced requires this) and ‘multiple colonial projects’ (Lambert and Lester 2006: 8–9). They assert that:

In partial critique of the ‘traditional’ imperial history, ‘new’ imperial history recognizes that there was never a single European colonial project, whether it be the pursuit of industrial or ‘gentlemanly’ capitalism, or governmental geo-strategising. Neither, accordingly, was there a single discourse, or set of representations and practices of colonialism. Rather, the agendas of colonial interests, their representations of colonised places and peoples, and their practices in relation to them, were not only differentiated, but also often constructed in opposition to one another. (Lambert and Lester 2006: 9)

They and their contributors illustrate this point by detailing a series of imperial ‘careerings’ across the British empire by individuals bound directly or indirectly to the institutions and administration of empire, highlighting the complexity, varied scale, constitutions and compositions of personal imperial spaces and networks.

This impressive array of geographical scholarship has provided an intriguing and challenging set of ideas and presentations and has considerably advanced our understanding of colonial and imperial processes, and one aim of this chapter, and the book as a whole, is to expose these ideas to a wider range of recognition and debate.

Definitions

The major concepts which require definition are ‘imperial’ and ‘colonial’, ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’. ‘Imperial’ and ‘imperialism’ carry the connotation of control of an empire from a metropolitan place (London, Berlin, Paris, Madrid, Lisbon, for example), the empire comprising the metropole plus territories usually removed geographically from the metropolitan state and having, with the exception of settler colonies with a predominantly European population, very little in common with their cultures and production systems. ‘Colonial’/‘colonialism’ applies to the specific locale(s) of overseas imperial control, including the means used on the ground, including European settlement, to suppress or modify indigenous cultures and modes of living. The two are clearly interlinked, but they do have different meanings. Engseong Ho, for example, suggests that:

colonialism is the occupation of territory by foreign settlers, soldiers, or administrators. Colonies are possessions of master societies, so master and subject populations answer to different laws ... Imperialism, in contrast, is the projection of political power across large spaces, to include other states whatever the means: colonies, mercenaries, gunboats, missiles, client elites, proxy states, multilateral institutions, multinational alliances. (Ho 2004: 225)

James Sidaway has similarly pointed to the significance of locations for the multiple meanings and condition of imperialism and colonialism, citing Loomba’s claim that definitions of imperialism and colonialism in terms of ‘historical mutations’ are in fact bettered by definitions based on space (Sidaway 1998: 6). The partial, discriminatory and interactive operations of colonialism and imperialism have been recognised by Stephen Howe in his book *Imperialism. A Very Short Introduction* (2002):

In general, colonial conquest was nearly always partial, the processes of social and cultural change it sponsored or unleashed still more so. The ideologies of colonial expansion and rule, too, were far more varied and ambiguous than is routinely suggested in much current writing. To recognize and explore this is not to ‘rehabilitate’ the colonial record, nor to excuse or downplay the violence, oppression, and exploitation that marked almost all its passages. (Howe 2002: 125)

He argues that the relatively recent emphasis on cultural aspects of imperialism and colonialism has led to an understatement of the significance of economic and political forces, and that more attention should be paid to the ‘political and legal systems of empires’ in their variety, their component viewpoints and purposes, and in relation to questions of how political systems existing in and over colonial territories differed from

those elsewhere. A distinction is also made between the intentions and the outcomes of colonial policy and action.

The idea of ambivalence in European conquests of distant places, proposed by Frederick Cooper, is also helpful and supportive of Howe's ideas. He claims that Europe's imperial and colonial activities and ideologies, notably those that attempted to distinguish between metropole and colony, the cultural superiority of the colonisers to that of the colonised, and the outward projection of knowledge, science and understanding, varied and fluctuated, and 'made the space of empire into a terrain where concepts were not only imported but also engaged and contested' (Cooper 2005: 4). While the terms 'imperial' and 'colonial' are widely used in this book, it is readily acknowledged that these are broad umbrella terms that in one sense can be unhelpful because of their implication of homogeneous process and all-embracing character in relation to what are in fact highly uneven and complex processes. At one level these are the outcome of quite small-scale, individual negotiations between ideologies and practices on the ground. On the other hand, the scale adopted in the book requires the qualified use of 'imperial' and 'colonial', and may help to make comparison with other published works whose narrative mainly operates at larger scales.

Imperial landscapes

One particular field of interest to historical geographers is the representation of landscapes of imperial and colonial territories through the evidence of written accounts, field investigation, maps, paintings, drawings, engravings and photographs. Mark Brayshay and Mark Cleary (2002: 5–10) have outlined the extent of landscape modification in the British empire, notably in the late and immediately post-Victorian era, noting that 'A pervasive theme ... is the argument that landscapes are shaped as much by the ideologies and philosophies of the peoples who create them as by the practical work that brings them into physical existence' (Brayshay and Cleary, 2002: 5).

Significant processes involved survey and mapping, plans for and the foundation of settlements, the effects of events such as gold rushes, the role of propaganda, the geographical imaginations of states and settlers, and interactions with indigenous cultures. Gareth Shaw and Paul Hudson have analysed the contents, production and distribution of colonial trade directories, with particular reference to Wellington, New Zealand, as sources of knowledge about colonial urban landscapes and as symbols

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Excerpt

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Fig. 1.1 Statue of Sir Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) on the east side of the Singapore River. Photo © R. A. Butlin.

of the industry and culture of the metropole and of colonies, of technical modernity (postal systems, printing systems), and of propaganda through exhibitions and displays (Shaw and Hudson 2002: 51–66). Their broader context was that of ‘serving the needs of local communities, whilst at the same time acting as commercial windows on the manufactured goods of the mother country ... The colonial trade directories were creating and reinforcing the commercial ties of empire, part of a network of information ties that bound centre and periphery together and helped to shape their respective identities’ (Shaw and Hudson 2002: 53). Directories for Wellington from the 1860s show how the commercial and industrial landscapes of that city

reflected a strong British influence, with many local companies acting as agents for British companies and some for Australian enterprises.

The effects of imperialism and colonialism on landscapes were reflected in the many buildings and statues erected in the colonies of European states, often in metropolitan style, or in a style which mixed local and imperial styles, and notably in their towns and cities. A parallel process also operated, with buildings and statues in metropolitan European states showing clear evidence of colonial and imperial themes.

The naming of places and streets was a familiar product of colonial activity. Within the British empire, many towns were named after Queen Victoria, a monarch of whom statues were also frequently found in towns at home and overseas. David Cannadine (2001: 103) stated that: 'Statues of Victoria (especially), and also of Edward VII, George V and George VI, were prominently placed in city squares and in front of government houses. From Cairo to Canberra, Wellington to Johannesburg, Vancouver to Valetta, the image of the queen-empress appeared, often in canopied magnificence', together with major constructions such as the railway terminus in Bombay, and the naming of many urban streets and places after British monarchs, politicians and administrators.

There were similar urban reflections of metropolitan authority in other European empires and colonies. In Algiers there was a square named after, and a statue of, General Bugeaud, the governor-general, a rue des Colons, and a place du Gouvernement (Çelik 1997: 183–4). David Prochaska has suggested a typology of colonial place names for the French colonial city of Bône in Algeria:

There were streets named after battles or personages of the Napoleonic era, especially concerning Napoleon's invasion of Egypt: rue Kléber, rue Castiglione, rue Josephine... there was another group of streets named after the Orleanists of the July Monarchy: rue Louis-Philippe, rue d'Orléans... Later in the century Third Republic people and places would supply the bulk of the street names in the new city and suburbs, such as Anatole France, Jean Jaurès, and Léon Gambetta. (Prochaska 1990: 209–10)

There were streets named after Christian saints, those that were Jewish in origin, and some had geographical names.

Far and away the largest group of street names referred to the French colonization of Bône, and in particular to the conquest and early occupation. First, there were the names of warships – frigates, brigantines, barks – which transported the French troops: rue Béarnaise, rue Suffren... Most numerous, however, were the streets named after those who had taken part: rue Damrémont, the general who first occupied Bône in 1830, rue Huder.

Villages in the region were also named after colonial military officers (Prochaska 1990: 210–11).

In Windhoek in Namibia (formerly German South-West Africa), there were streets named Kaiserstraße, Bulowstraße, Stübelstraße, Leutweinstraße, and a statue of Major Curt von François, who had ‘led the massacre of scores of Witbooi women and children in the early morning of April 12, 1893’ (Steinmetz and Hell 2006: 177). These symbolic landscapes of oppression were changed in many colonial countries on independence, with statues being removed and street names changed. The street names of European colonies were not, however, total replacements or innovations: they frequently existed alongside indigenously named streets and buildings.

Descriptions of colonial landscapes frequently reflected changing perceptions of exotic places, such as the tropics, and these have recently been subject to postcolonial analyses and interpretations, recognising that the tropics, as Felix Driver and Luciana Martins (2005: 4) put it, ‘have long been the site for European fantasies of self-realization, projects of cultural imperialism, or the politics of human or environmental salvage. In the postcolonial world, these fantasies have if anything become more pervasive, if distinctly less enchanting.’ European visions, encounters with, and mappings of the tropics by Europeans changed through time and with transactions of knowledge, processes that have been ‘actually transformative of the European sense of culture and of history – of the temperate self’ (Driver and Martins 2005: 5). The envisioning of the tropics was not always as exotic, picturesque and romantic, but sometimes as fearful and threatening, both for would-be settlers and visitors, and also for the populations of the European metropolises. This was evidenced, *inter alia*, by the perception of danger from tropical diseases, such as leprosy, and the development of tropical medicine in the late nineteenth century as ‘the prime means by which this increasingly pathologized relation between tropical and temperate zones was to be described and regulated’ (Edmond 2005: 181).

Geographical models of colonial settlement: R. C. Harris

In his essay on the simplification of Europe overseas, the geographer Cole Harris pointed to the initial differences between the physical and cultural environments of three of the mid-latitude regions settled from Europe from the seventeenth century – Canada, South Africa, and New England (Harris 1977). He argued that the differences that emerged between the emigrants in these places had more to do with the availability of land than