**The Ongoing Effect of Empire – In Britain**

In a Yougov poll conducted in January, 2016, 43% of those surveyed regarded empire as a “good thing”, (<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/01/18/rhodes-must-not-fall/>). In a similar poll carried out two years ago 49% of respondents thought that “former British colonies are now better off for having been part of the empire”, and a disturbing third of participants wished that Britain still had an empire (<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire/>).

Such attitudes reveal a lack of understanding of the nature and effects of colonial conquest and rule, spurred by insufficient education about the realities of empire (<https://theconversation.com/school-curriculum-continues-to-whitewash-britains-imperial-past-53577>) and an imperial historiography that tends evaluate empire either “neutrally” (<https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/o/oxford-history-of-the-british-empire-ohbe/?cc=gb&lang=en&>), or offers a triumphalist narrative that heralds the benefits of empire for Britain while ignoring its devastating impact on the peoples whose lands were taken, cultures transformed, and economic well-being decimated (<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/54153/empire/>).

**The reality about empire**

To take the case of India, in the seventeenth century it produced a quarter of the world’s income – equal to the whole of Europe combined – and it’s per captia GDP was 80 per cent that of Britain’s (<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/53977/1/WRAP_Broadberry_07.2010_broadberry.pdf>). But following what William Dalrymple has described as “the supreme act of corporate violence in world history,” namely the gradual conquest, plunder and subjugation of India by an English trading company with one of the most powerful armies in the world, standards of living fell rapidly (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/04/east-india-company-original-corporate-raiders>).

In just the half century following the dissolution of the East India Company and the imposition of crown rule in 1858 (the start of what is popularly known as the ‘Raj’), per capita income declined by over 50 percent, life expectancy fell by 20 percent, and between 12 to 29 million Indians died in famines that the colonial regime largely facilitated instead of alleviating ”(<https://www.versobooks.com/books/150-late-victorian-holocausts>). Rather than leaving the colonized “better off”, empire therefore led, instead, to the creation of what we now term the “third world”.

While the British liked to boast that they were bringing the ‘rule of law’ to lawless peoples, they instead supplanted indigenous systems of law with ones that were alien, discriminatory and imposed by force – and that could, moreover, be suspended in the face of real or imagined threats to the security of colonial regimes. Colonies largely devolved, therefore, into states of exception, in which the colonized were reduced to what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has termed “bare life”, namely individuals who were denied the protection of law and whose lives were, therefore, disposable (<http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=2003>).

**Why we need empire**

The brutal nature of empire has been well documented by scholars of colonialism. Why, then, do we continue to talk about empire in ways that are no longer acceptable when it comes to fascism, for example, or slavery? Why do school children continue to learn about the horrific violence perpetrated on European bodies by individuals such as Hitler and Stalin but not by Britain’s colonial administrators on non-white bodies ‘elsewhere’? Despotism, while anathema in Europe, is still clearly regarded as being permissible when enacted by Europeans on non-white peoples in other parts of the world.

This is not only because of the persistence of racial and cultural assumptions about non-Western peoples. It is also because we still need empire, not just to construct a positive (not to mention masculine, militarist and Christian) national narrative, but to validate current attitudes and behaviour towards the non-Western world. Just as imperialists justified their own precarious claims to sovereignty over foreign peoples by labelling lands and peoples that refused to be subjugated “barbaric”, “rogue states” or “terrorists”, we need a positive image of empire, namely a belief in its purportedly ‘civilizing’ imperative, to rationalize our treatment of ‘others’ both outside and within the nation-state.

**Brexit, immigration, and the ongoing effects of empire on ‘us’**

But there is another reason that we continue to regard empire in a positive light, namely because apart from economics, or from the odd cultural transmission and transfusion (like chicken tikka masala), we see the effects of empire as being one-sided, as affecting ‘them’ and not ‘us’. But in Britain even supporters of empire have long been troubled by the dangerous effects of empire on Britain itself (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674027244>). It’s not possible to govern a quarter of the world’s population despotically (as was the case at the height of Britain’s empire), and to justify such governance through a process of ‘othering’, without profoundly shaping Britain in the process.

We can see this not only in the Brexit vote, but in the ways in which certain segments of the population – not just ‘others’, such as refugees and immigrants, but British citizens – have been reduced, by the withdrawal of state protection, to “bare life”. This is apparent in the Conservative government’s austerity measures, which a recent UN report has declared

a breach of international human rights (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/austerity-government-policy-conservatives-poor-food-banks-inequality-un-a7110066.html>).

Most of us continue to ignore such policies because they affect the poor and marginalised. Just don’t make the ‘mistake’, as I did, of marrying a non-British or non-European spouse. If you do, make sure you have a minimum income of £18,600 (or £22,400 if you have a child) (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/feb/22/absurd-minimum-income-visa-rules-forcing-uk-citizens-into-exile-court-told>), not to mention thousands of pounds of additional cash to spare for visa fees, biometric testing, and the newly-introduced £200 annual “health surcharge”, if you want to have the privilege of remaining in your own country with your spouse and not be forced into exile or to a life apart from your family. Such policies reveal a state that, in order to ensure its ‘welfare’ and ‘security’, is

capable of rendering us all “bare life”.