

## **Commentary: New Directions for Historical Geographies of Colonialism**

**Alan Lester**

**Director of Interdisciplinary Research and Professor of Historical Geography**

**School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9SJ, UK**

In recent years historical geographers have perhaps had more impact within the field of colonial, imperial and postcolonial studies than in any other branch of broader historical studies (Driver 2013). Prominent imperial historians have drawn explicit attention to a 'spatial turn' within their discipline, citing the works of geographers such as Doreen Massey and of the historical geographers who have deployed the concepts of relational space that she articulates so well (Massey 2005; Lester 2013). The American 'new imperial historian', Antoinette Burton writes that her field is 'highly interdisciplinary, drawing on scholarship in literary studies, anthropology, and geography – geography being perhaps the most influential in the long run for recourse to spatial ways of thinking and interpreting' (Burton 2011, 14-15). The purpose of this commentary is to ask 'what next'? Having helped engineer greater attention to trans-imperial networks, mobilities and flows that destabilise core-periphery binaries within imperial and colonial studies, where are historical geographers poised to make the most innovative contributions within this same interdisciplinary field in the coming years?

I want to suggest two main contributions that historical geographers are already making, or could make, to the next major 'turn' in colonial studies. The first concerns the elaboration of environmental or more-than-human / assemblage approaches, and the second, a potential intervention in controversies about the relative violence of empires.

### **More than Human Approaches**

Historical geographers have long been especially attentive to human-environmental relations, even if their work has often been overlooked by environmental historians (Baker, 2003, 81). Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking's collaboration is an excellent example of work across the disciplines which integrates environmental and societal developments (Pawson and Brooking 2013). But these human imbrications in environmental dynamics are taking a novel turn with the adoption of assemblage theory (see De Landa 2006).

Not only are non-human animals, but also plants, pathogens, technological infrastructures and other material phenomena being seen as co-actants in the creation, territorialisation and deterritorialization of dynamic assemblages: assemblages of humanity-animals-plants-technology, in which the sum is more than the total of its parts. Empires were particular configurations of such assemblages as they brought together shipping, rail and print technologies to provide opportunities to pursue colonial projects such as humanitarianism, settlement and governmentality. Novel alignments of such technologies propelled and maintained distributions of people, texts, images and organisms across oceans and at a global scale. Such alignments and the distributions of people, biota and resources that they enabled reconfigured power relations between human groups and were the foundations for what has conventionally been referred to as 'the expansion of Europe'.

A fine example of new ways of thinking about the human-non-human assemblages of empire is Kirsten Greer's work focusing on the ways that British military officers' interest in ornithology and the migrations of birds intersected with ocean currents and weather systems to shape geopolitical understandings of the natural divisions and circulations within the empire (Greer 2013, 2015). Other examples are the increasing attention being paid to the intersections between human movements, political imperatives and the transmission of pathogens across imperial space (Peckham 2015), and the analysis of the integrated role of animals in the configuration of British and imperial human societies (Howell 2015).

Extending our accounts beyond the human in such theoretically innovative ways enables historical geographers not only to consolidate their longstanding contribution to environmental histories of empire, but also to engage with histories of disease and medicine, of technology and science, and of commerce and economy. With a foothold in broader imperial histories and colonial studies, historical geographers are poised to innovate again not only with, but also beyond, their own sub-discipline.

### **Violence**

Some prominent historians tend to level two interconnected charges against the new imperial histories associated with historical geographers' work on empire. The first is that the networked approaches that geographers have fostered tend to be preoccupied with the immaterial, the trivial and the superficial (i.e. the cultural), ignoring the real sinews of empire which are grounded in economics and geopolitics. Even while it overlooks the tremendous gains that have been made through attention to trans-imperial configurations of race, class and gender, there is an element of truth to this critique because economic, military and infrastructural unevenness, all of which are preoccupations of governmentality, do tend to be under-analysed in much of this work. The more-than-human approaches mentioned above may help address this criticism. But this critique of new imperial histories and geographies is closely bound up with another.

Historians like Jeremy Black and, most prominently, Niall Ferguson, allege that much of the recent imperial historiography is distorted by a politically motivated leftist attack on the British Empire and its violence. Given that Britain's was only one among many empires in world history, and that it apparently relied to a much greater degree on cooperation and mutual benefit than did many older or contemporaneous empires, their argument is that it was a much more moderate and implicitly civilising empire than most others (Black, 2015, Ferguson 2004). In Britain's empire, it is claimed, violence was the exception rather than the rule, an aberration from preferred governmental techniques rather than their *modus operandi*.

One thing that is becoming increasingly clear, through the controversy over the Foreign and Commonwealth Office archives that were 'migrated' to Britain and kept secret upon decolonisation, is the much greater extent of violence, including systematic torture and execution, employed by the British in defence of their empire (Anderson 2011; see also the excellent Wikipedia entry: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign\\_and\\_Commonwealth\\_Office\\_migrated\\_archives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_and_Commonwealth_Office_migrated_archives)). To me, however, a debate about whether Britain's empire was more or less violent than other empires or indeed other non-imperial forms of rule seems rather misguided.

Of course there were various pre-colonial forms of marginalization, exploitation and oppression, enforced with varying degrees of direct violence, in each of the territories colonised by Britons. A debate over which polities were more or less violent runs the risk of replicating some of the dangers that we have seen in Australia's History Wars, only on a more global scale. There, historians such as Henry Reynolds, who had thoroughly immersed themselves in the archives, claimed that a number of massacres of indigenous peoples were perpetrated by settlers seeking to displace them from the landscape. Generally, they were **believed** by those who read their work. It has been widely accepted among South African historians too, that both unofficial and official colonial commandos (bands of mounted and armed settlers) raided Khoesan communities with the express intent of 'hunting them down' and destroying them along the Cape's northern and, to a lesser extent, eastern, frontiers, and that British settlers engaged in such activities as well as Dutch-Afrikaners in their efforts to create colonial space. To point out these features of colonization was not to deny that Aboriginal and Khoisan Indigenous cultures practiced their own forms of political and gendered violence.

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While popular histories may choose to overlook findings about Britons' complicity in violence or play them down, they have generally not thus far been rejected as politically motivated 'fabrications'. But this is what Keith **Windschuttle** and other right wing apologists have done in Australia (Windschuttle 2002). Through their own politically motivated interventions, they have obliged colonial historians in Australia to develop a particular genre of cautious, juridical and quantitatively inclined approaches to **violence**. Historians such as Lyndall Ryan (2010), for instance, have felt obliged to go beyond the quite reasonable claim that 'settler massacres were widespread'. In addition, they must enumerate each and every recorded episode of colonial violence, fix rules for its eligibility to count as a 'massacre', weigh up the validity of testimony from different witnesses to it, detail the processes and personnel through which information on it became public, and include it in a table of other such episodes by date, region and 'type', before they can conclude that such massacres were, for example, 'responsible for the deaths of more than 11 per cent of the known Aboriginal population' in the Port Phillip District between 1836 and 1851' (Ryan 2010, 273).

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On the one hand, it seems wasteful that the Australian historical profession has had to invest so much time, energy and precious research resources in defence of claims that, elsewhere, would meet the standards of historical veracity with less effort. But on the other hand, the meticulous work of scholars like Ryan does at least help other scholars to flesh out a more detailed understanding of the historical geography of violence, in this case on the Port Phillip frontier. Ryan states that even she had not appreciated the extent of massacres before conducting her recent study.

Nevertheless, what interests me more than an endeavour to quantify and compare violence and brutality across time, space and culture (an issue that will never leave us, as some try today to weigh up Islamic State's individually targeted and publicised executions and massacres against the anonymous hundreds of thousands killed in the West's 'War on Terror'), is the question of how colonization reconfigured, destroyed or adapted established systems of inequality and the violence needed to sustain them: how colonists shifted the precolonial systems they found so as to prioritise their own interests, pursue their own projects and effectively globalize them. This entanglement between colonial and indigenous pre-colonial systems and patterns of violence and coercion, is I think, an area where historical geographers, sensitive to both the specificities and the interconnections between different places, could make a vital and politically informative contribution within and beyond our own sub-**discipline**.

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Such an enterprise will mean that historical geographers working on colonialism, including and perhaps especially those in Australasia, will have to be holistic in their approaches. Not only should they range across multiple sites tracing the trajectories of people, materials and ideas that co-constituted them; they should also be attentive to the movements and distributions of those non-human actants, infrastructures and technologies with which human agency is entangled, and to the principles of economics and geopolitics that govern these distributions. Finally, they could fruitfully engage in work on, with and alongside Indigenous communities in order that these concepts and approaches transcend ongoing settler colonial approaches (for a fine example, see the ARC funded Minutes of Evidence project: <http://www.minutesofevidence.com.au/>).

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