



## Imperialism and empire

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# CHAPTER 1

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### Introduction

So much of our world today has been shaped by imperialism. From the expeditions to the Americas in the fifteenth century through to the interventions in the Middle East in the twenty-first century, imperialism has indelibly marked modern times, forging human geographies on every continent and leaving legacies still seen and lived to this day. As Robert Young argues, the ‘entire world now operates within the economic system primarily developed and controlled by the west, and it is the continued dominance of the west, in terms of political, economic, military and cultural power that gives this history a continuing significance’ (2001: 5). Moreover, given the ongoing wars prosecuted in the name of western civilization in the world today, Derek Gregory prompts us to recognize ‘the ways in which so many of us continue to think and act in ways that are dyed in the colors of colonial power’ (2004: xv). This chapter initially sets out the ideologies and imaginings of imperialism by exploring the key concepts of *imperialism* and *imperial* or *colonial discourse*, while the subsequent chapter examines the tangible practices of *colonialism* on the ground and the new geographies forged and contested as a result.

### Defining Imperialism

Imperialism can be defined as a concept and system of power, geoeconomic ascendancy and cultural subordination, envisioned from the centre of expanding nation-states and differentially operationalized in diverse locales throughout the

world. Definitions are always fraught with difficulties, of course, and it is important to recognize the complexities of the terms *empire*, *imperial* and *imperialism*, which have been shown to have connoted different historical cultural meanings and political realities through time (Loomba, 1998). In general terms, imperialism has historically operated in various forms. As Dan Clayton outlines, there have been ‘over 70 empires in history’ (2009a: 189). Temporally, these comprise ancient, medieval, early modern, modern and contemporary, and geographically include, for example, the former Inca, Greek, Roman, Chinese, Ottoman, Spanish, British, Japanese and Soviet empires. Differentiating models of empire is hugely problematic; there has been considerable debate concerning the extent to which colonial expansion was state-driven and centred, for example (Hardt and Negri, 2000). That said, 3 key variants of state-driven imperialism on a *global* scale are sketched below, namely: (a) the early modern Spanish imperial model; (b) the more globalized and advanced version of the major European powers of the late nineteenth century; and (c) the new imperialism or neo-imperialism of US military and economic ascendancy in the present (Johnson, 2000; Young, 2001; Harvey, 2003; Smith, 2003; Gregory, 2004).

Colonizations had taken place in Europe, Asia and elsewhere in the medieval and earlier periods, when the Greek, Roman, Chinese and Islamic empires advanced in geographically contiguous territories largely without specific mercantile or state-driven logics of expansion. The first modern, transoceanic, global empire was forged in the New World of the Americas by the conquering armies of the Spanish conquistadors from the late fifteenth century. The bureaucratic Spanish administrations in these new worlds were typically dependent on isolated military

power and direct taxation on indigenous peoples and were not initially at least integrated into an imperial network of capitalist overseas endeavours like later European empires (Young, 2001).

Imperialism in its nineteenth-century design was developed by the French via the notion of a *mission civilisatrice*, which was an ideological justification for aggressive territorial expansion enabled by technological innovation. The *mission civilisatrice* invoked the idea of bringing French civilization, culture and language, together with Christianity, to the uncivilized and unenlightened, who were to be assimilated. This neat justification for superimposing the cultures and values of *us* on *them* was also a key feature in the contemporary British notion of a *civilising mission*. However, both ideologies of empire had previous antecedents in early modern Spanish and English colonial discourses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that centred on notions of reform and assimilation.

By the late nineteenth century, the French, British and other European imperial powers were ‘increasingly drawn into a competitive global economic and political system’, whose central underlying objective was to ‘combine the provision of domestic political and economic stability with the production of national prestige and closed markets in the international arena through conquest’ (Young, 2001: 30-31). According to Young, the imperial scramble for Africa in the early twentieth century by the British, French, Germans and others represented the high point of imperial state rivalries and reflected an expanded capitalist world economy, typified by increased production and consumption. Young’s tendency to see imperial growth as almost

exclusively state-driven, however, ignores the multiplicity of interests and projects pursued by Europeans that might ultimately result in formal or indeed informal imperialism. For example, there was no state logic to the Puritan colonization of America, the missionary-led colonization of the Pacific, or (directly at least) the East India Company's activities in India (Lambert and Lester, 2004).

Imperialism in its formal sense effectively ended with the retreat of the European empires as the twentieth century progressed, and this was due to a number of factors including: the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the emergence of a powerful state opposed to western imperialism; resistance to empire from colonized peoples throughout the world; the growing inability of European powers to administer their colonies effectively after the exhaustions and expense of WWII; and finally the subsequent appearance of a new superpower on the world stage, the USA, which viewed existing imperial trading structures as an impediment to its own economic activities overseas (Young, 2001; Larsen, 2005). The last reason cited here points to the fact that the new world order that replaced imperialism was in many ways a more subtle, informal version of the same favourable economic power structures dictated by the west: *neo-imperialism*.

### **Imperialism and discourse**

Imperialism was legitimized and sustained through purposeful discursive imaginings, identifications and ascriptions, referred to as *colonial discourse* (also typically referred to as *imperial discourse*, but for the purposes of clarity in this chapter and the next, I use the term *colonial discourse*). Its analysis is critical to our understanding of

how imperialism works (see the next chapter for its overarching relations to colonial practice). Colonial discourse equates to the prevailing representations of imperial power that sought to normalize imperial mindsets and the rights of colonial intervention and domination. Imperialism should not be understood as only driven by political and economic logics, as Nicholas Thomas reminds us; rather, it ‘has always, equally importantly and deeply, been a cultural process’ in which ‘discoveries and trespasses are imagined and energized through signs, metaphors and narratives’ (1994: 2). In other words, imperialism’s cultural discourses served not simply to ‘mask, mystify or rationalize forms of oppression that are external to them’ but were ‘constitutive of colonial relationships in themselves’ (Thomas, 1994: 2). This is what Loomba means when she asserts that ‘power works through language, literature, culture and the institutions which regulate our daily lives’ (Loomba, 1998: 47).

In exploring questions of colonial discourse, a fundamental starting point is Edward Said’s illuminating and seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). Inspired by Michel Foucault’s work on the intrinsic relationship between power and knowledge, *Orientalism* examined a wide range of western representations of the east by novelists, academics and others during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which Said showed to create a collective, powerful European imaginary of the Orient in which the west is posited via a series of binaries as a superior, civilized and rational authority over an inferior, barbaric and irrational subordinate. For Said, imperialism was underpinned by these powerful discourses or representations of what he called *Otherness*. Said’s notion of *imaginative geographies* (see also the ‘Imaginative Geographies and Geopolitics’ chapter), which he revealed to be inherent

in the colonial discourse of Orientalism was further elaborated in his later work, *Culture and Imperialism*, in 1993. As Karen Morin highlights, this key concept has revealed the ‘invention and construction of geographical space’ that ‘constructs boundaries around our very consciousness and attitudes, often by inattention to or the obscuring of local realities’, and to this end the concept has been hugely significant in drawing careful attention to ‘spatial sensitivity’ in colonial and postcolonial studies (2004: 239).

In thinking through how discourse functions in the identification of Others, Said’s notion of *cultural ascription* is particularly useful. He has shown how the prioritization and networking of the language and representational practices of Orientalism, for example, serves to collectively naturalize human ‘types’ via ‘scholarly idioms and methodologies’, which literally ‘ascribes reality and reference’ (1978: 321). Colonial discourse generates and sustains dominant and colonizing knowledges (knowledges that in turn facilitate power) by ascribing identity and difference to distinct spaces, places and peoples (Gregory, 2001; see also the ‘Identity and the Nation’ chapter). Colonial discourse’s binaries of Self and Other are ultimately cemented by institutional ascriptions of human *types* to specific environmental and cultural settings (see the ‘Illustrative Geographies’ chapter for a discussion of map-making and geography’s role as a discipline in colonial history).

Inspired and informed by Said’s postcolonial critique, various geographers have alerted us to the subtle mechanisms of differentiation and purposeful relations of power, race, gender and sexuality inherent in the colonial discourses of former

imperial powers (Blunt and Rose, 1994; Lester, 2001; Morrissey, 2003; Clayton, 2004; Kumar, 2006). The histories of geography have also been examined in recent years, highlighting the role of geographical institutions, methods and academics themselves in imperial practices of ‘exploration, mapping and landscape representation, and divisive discourses on climate and race’ (Clayton, 2009a: 190; see also Ploszajska, 2000 and Heffernan, 2003). Many geographers have sought particularly to ‘decolonize the geographical constitution and articulation of colonial discourses in both the past and the present, [and] also to decolonize the production of geographical knowledge both in and beyond the academy’ (Blunt and McEwan, 2002: 1). In addition, however, they have also ‘warned against reducing imperialism to discourse’ and have insisted on ‘the need to materially ground understanding of imperialism’s operations’ (Clayton, 2009b: 374; this is the focus of the next chapter).

### **Approaches to understanding imperialism**

One of the challenges in studying colonial geographies is that of drawing the sometimes problematic conceptual distinction between imperialism and colonialism. Robert Young’s luminous work, *Postcolonialism*, is particularly instructive on this primary point. Young makes the useful argument that *imperialism* can be equated to a *concept* or ideology of territorial expansion, economic control and cultural superiority, while *colonialism* is best understood as the *practice* of domination of alien peoples, frequently though not always underpinned by imperialism. For Young, imperialism was ‘typically driven by ideology from the metropolitan centre and concerned with the [systematic] assertion and expansion of state power’, whereas colonialism was primarily ‘economically driven’ by migrant settler communities,

speculators or trading companies and was concerned with more ad hoc, localized matters of territorial and economic administration (Young, 2001: 16-17). Putting the distinction between imperialism and colonialism another way, Ania Loomba prompts us to think of the difference between them in 'spatial terms', where imperialism 'originates in the metropolis' and leads to the process of 'domination and control', while its effect, colonialism, is what 'happens in the colonies as a consequence of imperial domination' (Loomba, 1998: 6).

In historical geography, the study of imperialism has been critically approached in at least three main ways, as Dan Clayton (2009b: 373-374) has recently shown: first, imperialism has 'been analysed in economic and political terms – as central to the evolution of capitalism and the nation-state' (Lenin theorized imperialism as the 'highest stage of capitalism' (Lenin, 1969)); secondly, since the 1980s, imperialism 'has been studied as a discourse – or grammar – of domination fuelled by images, narratives and representations, and shaped by categories of gender, sexuality, race, nation and religion, as well as capital and class'; and finally, imperialism has more recently been examined via an "imperial networks" approach, which 'treats metropole and colony as mutually constitutive'. All three approaches have been critiqued in relation to how effectively they discriminate and disaggregate different logics of imperial power. Harris (2004: 165), for example, has charged approaches that concentrate on imperialism as a discourse with privileging the cultural logic of imperialism and therefore obscuring 'other forms of colonial power'.

For the contemporary world, neo-imperialism has been identified and studied in two further interrelated ways: (a) in the Marxist sense as a system of economic

domination, frequently associated with the west's hegemonic world position; and (b) via the notion of an American military and economic *empire lite* or *empire in denial*; the advancement of which accelerated under the pretext of the so-called *war on terror* in the post-9/11 world (Agnew, 2003; Harvey, 2003; Ignatieff, 2003; Gregory, 2004; Larsen, 2005; Smith, 2005). In examining neo-imperialism, many historical geographers have offered insightful critiques by carefully spatializing and historicizing the antecedents of contemporary western interventions overseas. A key strength of any critical historical geography lies in its capacity to contextualize the present by recognizing the past – seeing its legacies and narrating the historical relations of power and politics that continue to bound people and places throughout the world (see, for example, Kearns, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, I want to return to the work of Edward Said. As the key writer in the field, his reading of imperialism and discourse is vitally important. It can be challenged by the fact that it concentrated almost solely on the written text of high culture to the detriment of the various visual cultural discourses of art and photography and other representations such as travel writing. Said's relative lack of attention to gender and his sometimes limited acknowledgment of the agency of anti-colonial resistance have also come in for specific criticism (Lester, 2000; Young, 2001). However, his critical deconstruction of the historical language, power relations and subject positions of the western *Self* and the external *Other* continues to have an enduring and fruitful legacy. His work still possesses a key relevance to the world today in which crude and essentialist distinctions between *us* and *them* are

continuously invoked in the all-powerful and omnipresent discourse of the *war on terror*. Just like in nineteenth and twentieth century colonial Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere, today – sadly perhaps as much as ever – stereotyped representations stand for knowledge itself and underpin the execution of power.

### **Summary**

- Imperialism can be defined as a concept and system of power, geoeconomic ascendancy and cultural subordination, envisioned from the centre of expanding nation-states and differentially operationalized in diverse locales throughout the world.
- State-driven imperialism on a global scale has historically operated in three principal forms: (a) the Spanish imperial model; (b) the more globalized and advanced version of the major European powers of the late nineteenth century; and (c) the new imperialism or neo-imperialism of US military and economic ascendancy in the present.
- In the mid-nineteenth century, the French notion of a *mission civilisatrice* and British notion of a *civilising mission* were soon adapted by the other European imperial powers, and the early twentieth-century scramble for Africa represented the high point of imperial rivalries in an expanded capitalist world economy.
- Imperialism was imagined, legitimized and sustained through *colonial discourse*, which equates to the prevailing representations of imperial power that sought to normalize imperial mindsets and the rights of colonial expansion and domination.
- Inspired and informed by Edward Said's postcolonial critique, historical geographers have alerted us to the subtle mechanisms of differentiation and

purposeful relations of power, race, gender and sexuality inherent in the colonial discourses of former imperial powers.

- Critical histories of geography reveal the role of geographical institutions, methods and academics in the advancement of imperialism.

### **Further reading**

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