

Title—Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World
Authors—Frederick Cooper & Ann Laura Stoler
Year—1997

Categories: Empire, World History, Colonialism, Theory

Place: The World

Time: 1500-1960

Argument Synopsis:

An essay collection that is focused on the contingency of metropolitan-colonial connections and its consequences for patterns of imperial rule. Both Cooper and Stoler are critical of the failure of some scholars to consider the **reciprocal nature of the colonial relationship**. They emphasize how Europe was formed by its imperial projects as much as colonial encounters were shaped within Europe itself. Cooper and Stoler highlight how both colonies and metropolises shared in the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion. The collection of articles is focused on these tensions that informed the behavior of colonizers and colonized people during the period of colonialism. Cooper and Stoler underscore how this collection discusses the colonial form of empire and does not consider contiguous land empires such as the Ottoman Empire.

This anthology seeks to interrogate the tensions between the exclusionary practices of the colonial state and the **universalizing claims of bourgeois culture** that shaped the age of colonial empires in Europe. The authors are critical of past scholarship that reproduced the categories of colonialism by taking them too literally, rather than problematize the categories. Cooper and Stoler argue for scholars to consider colonial history through their conception of tensions of empire. They call for a more dynamic history of colonialism, that moves past colonial categories and mere denouncement of a form of power. The various essays highlight tensions of empire, both through theoretical discussions and case studies. The collection is organized into sections, the first focused on theoretical framings, the second on colonial categories, and the third and fourth focused on case studies demonstrating the implantation/contestation of these theories and categories.

The essay collection is divided into four sections: “Framings,” “Making Boundaries,” “Colonial Projects,” and “Contesting the Categories of Rule.” Ann Stoler’s “Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia,” is focused on the construction of colonial categories and national identities. Stoler proposes the concept of “interior frontiers,” and claims that the issue of mixed marriages and their resulting offspring as an example. The existence of these mixed children called into question the colonial categories that determined who was a citizen and how nationality was assigned. Stoler poses a comparison between turn of the century French Indochina and the Dutch Indies and their colonial states’ reaction to the issues of mixed marriages. The anthology at large, aims to highlight the different interactions that influenced the colonial world. Empires did not exist in vacuums and were constantly influenced by their colonies and by one another.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Prominence of the imagery of ideal motherhood in the colonial contexts of Britain & Belgium
- Failure of some scholars of repeating the colonizer/colonized dichotomy in their work
- Colonial history has been too nationally bounded—failed to see connections & themes across borders