

Title—Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire

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Author—Alan Lester

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Place: British Empire

Time: 20th Century

Argument Synopsis:

Lester's article provides a comprehensive overview of the historiography regarding the spatiality of the British Empire, and specifically the evolution of theories surrounding the metropole and the colony. Lester begins by examining the concepts of core and periphery and the various ways it has been employed within the tradition of British imperial history. He then turns to concepts such as networks, webs and circuits, or characteristics of the 'new' imperial history. Lester claims that the spatial concepts of core and periphery have not been examined explicitly before and seeks to do so through a historiographical essay. He concludes by suggesting that these spatial concepts can be taken even further. Lester argues that the imperial policies of Britain were adapted to conditions found in each periphery and were not unilaterally imposed across the empire.

He begins with a discussion of Robinson and Gallagher's theory of the British Empire, which they defined as ex-centric. Put another way, it was an expansionary initiative that moved from the colonial edge of empire to the British center. According to Lester, their theory inscribed an implicit geographical imagination onto the discipline of British imperial history. This theory was formulated before the period of decolonization, and Lester posits that decolonization fundamentally changed the ways that imperial historians were able to conceive of their subject. The fragmentation of empire itself resulted in the fragmentation of imperial history writing. Lester then highlights the emergence of Cain and Hopkins' theory that was focused on the metropolis in a deliberate challenge to Robinson and Gallagher. Their metropolitan focus was heavily criticized by other historians. Lester notes the tendency of historians to focus in either metropolitan-centric history, the regional history of colonized zones, or the thematic history of trans-imperial phenomena such as trade or migration. He reveals that John Darwin was one of the first to recognize the need to analyze the metropole and colony in the same frame.

In the 'new' imperial history that Lester discusses, the use of the designations of core and periphery have a specific analytical function—to explain and locate either the motivations for, or the causes of, British imperial expansion. The main point of difference within the imperial history tradition is where the 'causes' of British imperial expansion were located in the core itself or in its periphery. He reveals two aspects of this 'new' imperial history that inform its geographical imagination: concerns the notion of multiple colonial projects and the networks through which these projects were pursued. Lester is aware that colony-metropole interactions are components of much more extensive networks connecting multiple colonial and metropolitan sites. What emerges from this networked conception of imperial 'space' is a conception of 'place' not as a bounded entity but as a specific juxtaposition of multiple trajectories.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Networked conception of imperial interconnectedness is very useful, especially if one wants to consider metropole and colony, or colony and colony, within the same analytical frame
- Both metropolitan and colonial places are a coming together of multiple trajectories (such as people, objects, texts, ideas etc.) in specific ways at a specific time
- Colonial networks must be seen as provisional and contingent, but also sometimes ephemeral and even fleeting