

**Title—Roundtable: Imperial History by the Book: A Roundtable on John Darwin’s ‘The Empire Project’**

**Journal—Journal of British Studies**

**Author—John Darwin**

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Categories: Empire, Britain, Historiography

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Argument Synopsis:

Darwin’s book *The Empire Project* received a variety of reviews, and Darwin chooses to respond to three notable reviews in the piece “Imperialism History by the Book: A Roundtable on John Darwin’s ‘The Empire Project.’” He begins by noting that it is rarely a good idea to respond to reviews, as the author can look defensive. He organizes his response around four points from the reviews: violence, morals and empire, the place of social and cultural history, and ‘peace in our time.’

In terms of violence, Darwin underscores that the empire’s authority depended ultimately on the use of violence, but that this is also not a particularly novel thing to say. Most empire’s authority depended ultimately on the use of violence. It is more interesting to consider the scale of the empire’s violence, the forms of violence, the settings in which it was used, and on whom it was inflicted. While the British Empire certainly utilized lethal violence, Darwin argues that high levels of lethal state-sponsored violence are more likely to be a function of modernity rather than imperialism. Darwin posits that you need more than a few striking examples in order to fully grasp the scale, operation and meaning of British imperial violence.

In terms of morals and empire, Darwin received criticism for not being explicit enough in condemning the actions of the British Empire. Specifically, the reviews claimed that he should have condemned the empire for being morally reprehensible. In response, Darwin argues that it is usually better to refrain from judgement and present the evidence to allow the readers to make their own moral judgement. According to Darwin, presenting morality is not the concern of the historian—the historian’s concern is to explain why people in the past did certain things. However, he does claim that no one considering the British Empire is likely to proclaim its political and racial practices offer a model for future imperialism. This claim feels a bit dismissive, especially when works like Ferguson’s *Empire* exists. Darwin claims that morality should not be central to history because if all empires were deemed ipso facto ‘evil’ most of world history would need to be rewritten.

Darwin endorses the point of all the reviewers that the book is a history confined to the geopolitics, politics, and political economy of the British Empire. The book is aimed at a readership extending beyond those primarily interested in British imperial history. He acknowledges that his book would have been improved by paying more attention to gender. The reinsertion of both British and British imperial history into global history will change the terms of the debate.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Lethal violence was not the empire’s preferred mode of operation, mostly due to the cost
- The rise of subaltern studies has impacted all aspects of imperial history
- British Empire can be characterized as instable and uncertain, which allowed for cultural resistance across the empire