

Title—The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism

Author—Antoinette Burton

Year—2015

Categories: Colonialism, British Empire, Subaltern Studies, Feminism

Place: British Empire

Time: 1776-1940s

Argument Synopsis:

Burton sets out to problematize the dominant narratives used to discuss the British Empire at large, criticizing the taken for granted nature of the rise and fall narrative of empire. She argues that dissent, rather than ‘Pax Britannica,’ was the main feature of the British Empire. ‘Pax Britannica’ refers to the period of relative tranquility from 1815 to 1914, and it is a concept that Burton aims to deconstruct by highlighting the continued nature of resistance and dissent, even during this period. By bringing together trends in both feminist and subaltern histories, she is able to complicate the historiographical narrative of British imperialism. The book covers the period of 1776 until the 1930s-1940s, ending noticeably before the typical narratives of decolonization. Burton claims that her approach serves to illustrate the fractured and limited nature of Britain’s imperial supremacy. Her book seeks to dismantle the hegemonic construction of imperial superiority by arguing that its inevitability was never guaranteed.

She organizes the study into three parts; part one dismantles claims to imperial military dominance by focusing on imperial narratives that reveal the inherent tension and uncertainty of Britain’s military superiority. In this section, she discusses Winston Churchill’s *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* as a text that reveals the fractured nature of British military superiority. The second part considers the economic basis for dissent and resistance by looking at strikes, boycotts, and other forms of resistance both within the imperial territories and the metropole. She discusses the use of economic protest in order to reveal the economic side of British imperialism and the ways that colonial subjects understood how best to get British attention. Part three looks at the disruption of the imperial political order, including multiple insurgencies by individuals and movements.

According to Burton, the very character of imperial power was shaped by its challengers and by the trouble they made for its stewards. Daily life in the British Empire should be characterized by a combination of resistance and insecurity. Because of an absence of counter narratives of protest and dissent within the British Empire, there is an assumption of basic stability especially during the Pax Britannica period. The process of moving away from the rise and fall narrative brings stronger attention on the disruptive work of the colonial subject. This framework lends itself well to illustrating the agency of colonial subjects in their resistance to imperial hegemony. Importantly, Burton does not set out to craft a comprehensive counter-history of British imperialism, but rather a starting point for histories of dissent and resistance within the British Empire. The history of the British Empire is not defined by its rise and fall, but by skirmish, scramble, stumble, and recovery.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Big histories of modern British imperialism should be underscored by the empire’s perpetual insecurity, as opposed to the traditional rise and fall narrative
- Empire was not cyclical, nor could it escape the ongoing resistance and dissent that formed the empire
- Empire was characterized by a culture of risk, uncertainty, and constant precariousness