

Title—The Second British Empire: In the Crucible of the Twentieth Century

Author—Timothy Parsons

Year—2014

Categories: Decolonization, Empire, Colonialism, Imperialism, Theory

Place: British Empire

Time: 1830-1999

Argument Synopsis:

Parsons' book is a survey history of the British Empire in the twentieth century on a global scale. The book is primarily a political history of the British Empire. Parsons traces the tensions between Britain's liberal democratic impulses and the autocratic nature of imperialism as the empire gradually declined from an early century peak to its dissolution in the decades following the Second World War. Parsons is concerned with what many historians have deemed the "Second British Empire," or the empire born of the new imperialism of the late nineteenth century and was characterized by formal rule over colonies. He reveals that formal rule of non-Western populations was expensive and unnecessary in the mid-nineteenth century when Britain was the premier commercial power in free trade. In response to their fellow European states beginning to create formal land empires, the British began a new type of imperialism in the later nineteenth century. This new imperialism was the result of short-term global economic and technological imbalances.

Parsons highlights how Britain in the late nineteenth century, as a liberal democracy, felt the need to justify their demands for tribute and submission. He argues that the second British Empire would not have been tenable if the British acknowledged their subjects as civilized equals—no moral or legitimate reason to deny them full equality if that was true. Instead of a single imperial system, there were many overlapping sub-empires that used very different political and social policies. This included the informal empire, the "white dominions," and formal colonies, to name a few. Parsons posits that empire building was a bipartisan project; most agreed that as an institution the empire was a matter of national interest and was therefore above party politics. The general public was largely unconcerned with the specific details of imperial rule and investment, Parsons claims that most accepted the vague notion that there was no inherent conflict between liberal democracy and empire.

Parsons characterizes the second British Empire as an untidy empire. One of its untidy aspects was that the various imperial interest groups had substantially contradictory agendas. He underscores how most of the new territories were run on a shoestring budget—indirect rule revealed the lack of resources for British officials to actually fulfill their promises of development. Most of the new territories were not economically viable and often had to draw support from the metropolitan treasury. The central tenets of the second British Empire were contradictory and often irrational. He argues that this empire was part of an evolving hybrid global culture that came from the interaction between Britons and their non-Western subjects. The fundamental reality was that all empires born in the late nineteenth century were inherently unstable. The empires of the last century were short-lived engines of globalization that left behind new and vital networks of migration, commerce, and cultural exchange.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The second British Empire can be characterized as an 'untidy' empire
- Indirect rule was an unspoken admission by British officials that they lacked the resources and popular support to make good on the developmental promises of the new imperialism
- Indian values and norms had a direct and profound impact on British imperial culture