

Title—Empires of the Mind: The Colonial Past and the Politics of the Present

Author—Robert Gildea

Year—2019

Categories: Imperialism, Metropolitan Culture, Memory, Decolonization, Politics

Place: The World (Europe)

Time: 1900-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Gildea's book argues that empire has molded the present and continues to shape the future of our world. He explores how the long-term networks of the two great nineteenth century global empires of Britain and France were kept in place over the long-term by cajoling, bargaining, and force where necessary. The book began with a lecture by Gildea that sought to answer two questions: how it was that those who liberated France from her colonial base in Algeria in 1944 were back ten years later, torturing suspected rebels who were trying to drive out the French in the Algeria war? How could so little have been learned from thinking about liberation and so many mistakes made? How far were France's current troubles with its immigrant population in some ways a replaying of the Algerian war? Gildea reveals it soon became clear that the study could not be limited to French colonialism—he needed a comparative study of Britain and France. This comparative approach allows a reconsideration of the influential interpretation that while French decolonization was violent and painful because of the Algerian War, Britain's was a peaceful and relatively 'painless' transfer of power to national elites. Gildea seeks to investigate what 'empires of the mind' meant to the British and French, i.e. how they fantasized about empire, came to terms with its loss and thought through the consequences of their colonial history.

Gildea pushes a view of empire as both a fantasy of glory and a chronicle of anguish. Under colonialism, the vast majority of indigenous people were systematically excluded from the prospect of exercising power and were brutally suppressed. Even post-decolonization, Gildea reveals that the economic and military power often remained in the hands of the former empires, a process known as neo-colonialism. He reveals how for British people of the metropolis the loss of empire 'out there' seemed to coincide with the arrival of former colonial peoples threatening the British 'way of life.' Gildea argues that the response in the metropolis was to reimpose colonial hierarchies, colonial segregation and colonial laws of exception. In his words: "the perceived threat of immigration from the colonies stimulated redefinitions of British or French national identity which explicitly or implicitly excluded immigrant populations." At the same time that Britain seemed less confident and more troubled by its colonial past, immigrants served as the unwilling bearers of the imperial and colonial past. The construction of Europe as an economic and political entity (the EU) coincided with the process of decolonization—almost trading an empire 'out there' for a European empire.

Gildea highlights the recent attention given to empires in the literature. He argues that the post-9/11 world which saw the United States as imposing a 'new imperialism' sparked interest in empires. National histories rarely dealt with empires, but now it is almost impossible to write a national history of Britain or France without dealing with empire. Gildea argues that in order to move forward, European countries must recognize the anguish caused by empire and lay to rest fantasies of rebuilding empire. The racist attacks in the metropole of those of immigrant origin may be an acting out of the colonial superiority felt by white people.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The more empire appeared to have fallen and the more national identity was threatened, the more a fantasy of empire was conjured up as the answer to all ills
- Empire existed in both the periphery and the metropolis
- Empires tended to take one of three forms: empires of trade, colonies of settlement, and territorial empires