

Title—Imperialism and Postcolonialism

Author—Barbara Bush

Year—2006

Categories: Theory, Empire, (Post)Colonialism, Culture, Politics

Place: The World

Time: 27 BCE-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Bush's book is a survey of the historiography of imperialism in an attempt to grapple with the many interpretations of imperialism from ancient to postmodern, with a concerted focus on the in-between years of the nineteenth and twentieth century European empires. She covers imperialism from Roman times through the present. More specifically, Bush utilizes comparisons to other forms of imperialism but is mostly concerned with the British Empire. She is determined to decenter British imperialism and insists on a comparative method that allows for evaluating extra-European rivals within the same frame of analysis. Her book represents an attempt to reposition the British Empire in a truly global context. To do so, she brings together a critical discussion of a huge range of works and ideas in imperial history, colonial and postcolonial studies. Bush is adamant that approaches to imperial history must build upon existing studies within a framework informed by the new insights of postcolonial theory. One way she attempts to reposition the British Empire in a global context is by emphasizing the simultaneity of British imperial ambition with that of Chinese and Japanese imperial aspiration.

Bush's main aim is to provide a broad overview of the dynamics of theoretical change and to address key questions of why and how conceptualizations of imperialisms have changed over time. Bush is primarily focused on cultural histories and on ideologies and representations of empire, which have generated the largest literature in the field. According to Bush, the most plausible explanations of imperialism need to account for the interaction of the economic, political, social, and cultural factors operating at both the local periphery level and within the metropolitan center of imperial power. In doing so, she aims to bring together the cultural and the material.

She uses a comparative methodology and highlights three case studies of imperialism for comparison: Ireland, China and Japan, and British-ruled Africa. In regard to Ireland, Bush is concerned with determining whether Ireland should 'belong' in comparative studies of empire or colonialism at all. Bush is most concerned with the cultural impact of imperialism in her comparisons. She accepts the stance that empire was as much cultural and intellectual as it was a political and economic phenomenon. Bush emphasizes the ways in which empire was predicated on colonial knowledge. Her book elucidates the ambiguities of the colonial impact, interrogates the changing nature of racism, identity and gender.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Imperial history needs to build upon existing conventional studies within a critical framework that incorporates insights informed by postcolonial theory
- The simultaneity of British imperial expansion and Chinese and Japanese imperial aspiration
- Empire was as much cultural and intellectual, as much predicated on colonial knowledge, as it was a political and economic phenomenon