



Empires, Modernisation and Modernities

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Abstract

In examining four recent books, this essay explores some key facets of contemporary scholarship on empire and the making of the modern world. Drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty's arguments about the often contingent relationship between modernisation as a set of material and institutional transformations and modernity as a cultural sensibility, it argues that the unfolding of the modern was messy, uneven, and remained in process until the age of decolonisation. The essay suggests that the range of modern formations that emerged out of empire-building were profoundly imprinted by local socio-political patterns and the weight of precolonial cultural traditions, meaning that modernisation never played out as an entirely homogenising force.

Keywords: empires, colonialism, modernity, modernisation, globalisation

Review of: Isa Blumi, *Foundations of Modernity: Human Agency and the Imperial State* (London: Routledge, 2012), 272 pp., ISBN: 9780415884648; Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 512 pp., ISBN: 9780691152363; Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 426 pp., ISBN: 978069115291; Damon Ieremia Salesa, *Racial Crossings: Race, Inter-marriage, and the Victorian British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 320 pp., ISBN: 9780199604159.

Introduction

Over the last two decades historians have subjected the relationship between empire building and modernity to sustained scrutiny. In particular they have interrogated the geographies of modernity, calling into question the long-established view that modernity was quintessentially European. In this view modernity – whether imagined primarily in technological, political, economic or cultural terms – developed in Europe, primarily in western Europe and especially in Great Britain, and from that centre was diffused outwards. Many scholars saw “western expansion,” a euphemism for empire, as a carrier of modernity and believed that modernisation, however slow, painful and uneven, was the key consequence and legacy of European empire building. This was, of course, an argument that echoed the very claims of the civilising mission, *mission civilisatrice*, or *missão civilizadora* that so often underwrote and legitimated colonialism.

Even if straightforward readings of empires as modernising and civilising agents might live on in the public sphere and in a few undergraduate classrooms, they have been long challenged by historians working on a range of issues and from a range of analytical and political vantage points. One key and enduring critique was forwarded by Eric R. Wolf’s *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), which undercut understandings of world history that saw European modernity as unconnected from the aggressive outthrust of European empires and the extraction of resources, commodity, labour and land by these increasingly expansive regimes. Moreover, Wolf challenged what he described as a “billiard ball” theory of history, which imagined societies as discreet, bounded, and durable: such a model, he showed, failed to recognise the enduring consequences of cross-cultural engagements and the cultural transformations they enacted. Moreover, as Wolf’s title pointed too, such visions of the past typically saw the “West” as the dynamic force in history, the catalyst that initiated change, the agent that bought motion, movement, and eventually “modernity” to supposedly static traditional societies.

In many ways, Wolf’s arguments anticipated two of the foundations of a lot of influential critical work on empires and colonialism produced in the wake of the “cultural turn”. First, Wolf emphasised the close connections between the projects of empire building and modernity, and, second, the profound entanglements that produced various inter-dependences between imperial “metropolises” and their “colonies”. Of course, Wolf was not the first to make such arguments: indeed, such arguments have long genealogies in anti-colonial thought and stood at the heart of Eric William’s

landmark *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) and were a significant thread in C. L. R. James's *Black Jacobins* (1938). But where arguments such as that forwarded by James and Williams were pushing against entrenched orthodoxies which generally discounted the significance of the colonies to the history of European nations, Wolf's arguments about both the links between empire and modernity and between colony and metropole were at the leading edge of a new wave of scholarship that fundamentally reassessed the nature and meaning of European imperialism. Most notably, in the British case where the question of empire has become an increasingly prominent and important historiographical issue, those two lines of thought have been defining characteristics of the so-called "new imperial history" that emerged from the late 1980s.¹

The precise extent and quality of the connections between Britain and colonies might remain contested, but now it is common to suggest that British modernity "at home" was profoundly shaped by connections to the colonies and by innovations first developed at the margins of empire.² Colonial spaces have been shown to have functioned as testing grounds and laboratories for modernity. This work has suggested that colonies were not only subject to political domination and economic exploitation, but they also functioned as locations where new forms of social organisation could be developed and tested, sites where new political and social regimes for the management of cultural difference were elaborated, and spaces where key forms of modern state practice were developed, including the development of finger-printing, the elaboration of regimes of surveillance, and modern regimes of information management grounded in the gazetteer, census, map, and museum.³ While the depth, authority and uniformity of such practices have sometimes been presumed rather demonstrated and some scholarship on colonial knowledge can only offer rather fuzzy and generalised accounts of the operation of colonial power, there is no doubt that this kind of work has fundamentally reshaped our scholarly apprehensions of what colonialism and modernity were (and are).

From a different angle, scholarship produced from within the tradition of world history has also affirmed the strong ties between modernity and empire building. Most notably, C. A. Bayly's *Birth of the Modern World* emphasised the importance of empires as agents of change at a global level and their function as key drivers of the emergence and spread of the "global uniformities" that we might see as markers of the modern age, including the nation-state, the global reach of key ideologies, the systematisation and reform of religion, influence of the professions, the authority of science, and the dissemination of industrial technologies.⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty has

praised this as a landmark global study, but also uses Bayly's work to elucidate what he terms the "modernization/modernity distinction". Chakrabarty distinguishes between "modernisation" – the material transformations and social formations that accompanied industrial technologies and the rise of the nation-state – and "modernity" – a self-reflexive cultural state that was (and is) underpinned by a particular set of apprehensions about the nature of the self, place and time.⁵ But, of course, such apprehensions were situated, grounded in particular cultural and political formations: to claim to be modern had a different freight in London and Ludhiana, Paris and Papeete, or Calcutta and Kalimpong. Thus it is important that we follow Chakrabarty to recognise that when historical actors made claims to modernity they were engaging in acts of both "ideology and imagination", making claims that imposed particular shapes on the past and which framed possible futures in particular ways.⁶

Empires in History

The four books reviewed here offer different vantage points on the nature of what we might think of as "imperial modernities": those forms of modernity that fashioned, contested and reworked within the extended domains created by the modernising work of imperial communication networks, transportation routes, political and religious institutions, and long distance cultural traffic. They also offer different models for how we might write and teach history and conceptualise the resonance of empires and colonialism in our contemporary moment. The works surveyed here operated a range of levels – from the truly global to the studies of particular localities (albeit with strongly outward looking and comparative sensibilities). Bringing works with these different analytical focal lengths together is a valuable exercise because it enables us to think about modernisation at both macro and micro levels and to think carefully through the complex relationships between the local and the global in the crafting of modern economic, political, and cultural formations.

Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's monumental *Empires in History* is not a work that is primarily focused on modernity, but its careful reconstruction of various imperial regimes provides rich insights into the connections between empire building and the shape of the modern world. *Empires in World History* is an unusually rich work that manages to deftly weave together narrative, incisive analysis, and historiographical reflection as it traverses a huge temporal and spatial range. It is important to note that this

range alone sets this volume apart from most other recent key synthetic accounts of empires, including John Darwin's *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire* (2007) or even the large multi-authored volumes such as those curated by Alfred McCoy.⁷ Only Tim Parsons's *The Rule of Empires* (2010) has tackled such a vast sweep, but Parsons' useful work is more episodic, less coherent, and avoids any sustained discussion of Russian, Chinese or "early modern" Muslim traditions of empire building.⁸

The range of *Empires in World History* allows it to offer clear and concise readings of both the commonalities and divergences between different imperial systems as they developed across time and space. For Burbank and Cooper, Rome and China stand as the key imperial innovators, developing influential economic, political and strategic "repertoires" that underwrote imperial governance (3-8). These improvised and flexible practices were developed by Roman and Chinese rulers into durable solutions to the "fundamental problem of how to govern and exploit diverse populations." (23) In the wake of Augustus, a pluralistic legal system underwrote imperial power. Ultimately, however, the Roman Emperor was a "King of Kings" who exercised power over a host of local chieftains and regional rulers (32). Rome promoted the idea that the empire was ultimately the legitimate and superior political community and citizenship, which was extended beyond Rome itself and was ultimately opened to all free adult males within the empire. Routine authority within the Roman imperial system rested, however, with the powerful Roman officials dispatched across the empire to oversee peace, trade and the incorporation of frontier societies into Rome's imperial ambit (41-2).

Conversely, the Chinese imperial tradition exerted much greater political control from the imperial centre and successive emperors used land grants and imperial appointments to reward the highly-educated officials who enacted the authority of the emperor on the ground. This was a durable tradition which framed imperial power until the end of the Qing dynasty in the early twentieth century and is one that Burbank and Cooper suggest continues to exercise some influence in contemporary China. This system was effective in part because it proved efficient in absorbing new ideas, techniques, and technologies from cross-cultural engagements, especially along Chinese's Eurasian frontiers, which were grafted into Chinese imperial culture. In part this strategy reflected the reality that China's rather nebulous and open borders encouraged ongoing interactions with various nomadic peoples, but also because connecting "core" territories in the east was quite difficult (42-3). In part because of these basic geographic facts, China's imperial model became more effective in recognising the value

of and co-opting the skills and knowledge of outsiders than the Roman insistence on imperial superiority.

The question of cultural difference stands at the heart of this account of imperial regimes. Burbank and Cooper are not invested in the history of identities – Cooper is a notable critic of that concept⁹ – rather they stress that the management of cultural difference was a central element in the statecraft within the expansive and heterogeneous political regimes by imperial powers. They suggest, for example, that Ottoman power allowed for the co-existence of various legal regimes, including Christian, Jewish and Muslim, within the heterogeneous and diffuse Ottoman polity.

The openness of the Ottoman model, Burbank and Cooper suggest, created opportunities for the more cohesive and aggressively expansionist orders that emerged from within Europe. In the long run, British and French commercial agents were adept at exploiting the freedoms granted to merchants in and around the Ottoman domains and were quick to establish new bridgeheads in the “East” in order to bypass the Ottoman hold on key overland routes. The growing ability of Europeans to control flows of capital, their success in gaining important footholds within the Ottoman economy, and the growing power of modernising and reformist ideologies all undercut the authority of successive Ottoman Sultans (344). In firmly connecting the rise of European imperial power in Asia with the erosion of Ottoman power, Burbank and Cooper confirm the outlines of C. A. Bayly’s argument in his important *Imperial Meridian* that the following of the Muslim “gunpowder” empires was a vital precondition to the emergence of European maritime empires as an ascendant force in the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Burbank and Cooper suggest that three main conditions lay the foundation for the emergence of these European maritime imperial formations: the high-value commodities finished, produced in, and traded from Asia, especially China; the ability of the Ottomans to constrict land-based trade with eastern Eurasia which was a key impetus to the stretching of European maritime activity; and the fragmented and fiercely competitive economic and political order that had developed within Europe itself. Thus in Burbank and Cooper’s account of global empire building, the emergence, expansion and influence of European imperial power is primarily located within the relationships between empires rather than reflecting any particular cultural sensibilities or capacities (5, 219-250).

This argument also reframes the emergence of the nation-state. Cooper and Burbank are critical of world history narratives that attach undue weight to the “rise of the state” in the “early modern” period, whether this is dated from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 or the age of revolutions which

is conventionally seen as bringing the “early modern” age to a close. They argue that the reconfiguration of political arrangements in western Europe, primarily England and France, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was primarily a “consequence” of empire, rather than an impetus for empire. Nations were created by the capacity of empires to channel “widely produced resources into state institutions that concentrated revenue and military force.” (8). This is a powerful argument that pushes against narrowly European readings of “state formation” and which also suggests that the stitching together of the territorial state and ethnicity (or nationality) was itself borne out of older imperial strategies and the interplay of imperial regimes. These engagements and struggles between different empires remained, Burbank and Cooper argue, key drivers of change in the twentieth century, fuelling World War I and playing a central role in the turbulent struggles over power, territory and influence that played out during and after World War II. The “age of decolonisation”, with its “mixed results” (438), did not bring an end to empires either, as a new version of “interempire competition” (437) played out during the Cold War on a global stage riven by inequalities and conflicts as older European territorial empires were slowly dismantled. In Burbank and Cooper’s view, empires remain spectres that haunt the global present, where states developing in previously former colonial domains struggle to deliver the promises of anticolonial movements and many conflicts, from Israel /Palestine to Afghanistan to the former Yugoslavia develop out of the failure to “find viable alternatives to imperial regimes.” (443)

Burbank and Cooper are critical of the application of chronological templates – “ancient”, “premodern”, “early modern” and “modern” – to structure historical analysis and to identify different types of empire building (17). They suggest that the idea of “modern” empires emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century as European theorists of empire promised a new age where “engineers and doctors,” not “conquistadors,” would instigate and direct change (287). They are sceptical of such readings and set aside the conventions of discussing “second” or “third” British empires, the “new” imperialism and so on, preferring instead to discuss shifting “repertoires of power”. (287) This means that *Empires in World History* tends to emphasise continuities, mirrorings, and reworkings rather than innovations and ruptures. Thus, in their discussion of late nineteenth and early twentieth century empire building, they suggest that despite their promise of technological and institutional transformation – what we would commonly designate as “modernisation” – empires rarely delivered progressive change. While these technologies effectively allowed some Europeans to act as

“better Mongols” – “moving fast, inflicting terror, claiming resources and submission and moving onward” – they typically did not deliver “systematic and efficient rule” (288).

Foundations of Modernity

Empires in World History's broad history of imperial techniques and management strategies can be usefully set aside the much narrower monographic focus of Isa Blumi's *Foundations of Modernity: Human Agency and the Imperial State*, which offers the sharpest and most focused theoretical dissection of “imperial modernity” of the works under review. Blumi's particular focus is the western Balkans, with discussions of Egypt, Yemen, and Kuwait serving as counterpoints to his reading of the social change under Ottoman rule. Blumi works hard to break open teleological narratives of imperial modernity by arguing for a return to the careful scrutiny of local political economies. Such an approach not only “contextualises” the transformations enacted by imperial power during the nineteenth century but also draws attentions to the fragmentary, limited, and messy nature of those transformations. The chief consequence of this approach is to suggest that it is fundamentally misleading to think about empire, modernisation or modernity as coherent and effective “projects” that were able to create unified socio-political systems or coherent cultural sensibility. Instead Blumi's history stresses the contingent and grounded forms that “modern” formations took as they were bent into particular shapes by the weight of local economic patterns, the regional patterns of the distribution of political power, and the particular cultural forms that grew out of geography and the demography of religion and ethnicity. *Foundations of Modernity* can be read as an effective series of case studies of how the deployment of what Burbank and Cooper would see as the Ottoman “imperial repertoire” played out in specific locales.

This approach not only recasts our understanding of Ottoman history, but challenges the ways in which History as a discipline has narrated the histories of these places and regions, especially the ways in which it has been mobilised to naturalise and legitimate modernity as inevitable. According to Blumi such approaches have been deeply encoded by “western domination”, a framework that has been simultaneously “a discursive phenomenon, an ideological project, a myth” and a “pernicious mythology” which needs to be cast aside (1). This kind of argument is not unfamiliar: Richard Wolin has suggested that “modernity” functioned as a key justification for the

“horrors and excesses of colonialism” and Lynn Thomas has delineated some of the key ways in which European claims to modernity and imperial authority have figured Africa (and often continue to) as the “inverse of all things modern”.¹¹

One of Blumi’s concerns is with the ways in which historical understandings of modernity flatten and elide both the significance of local structures and dynamics during modernisation and the weight of pre-modern cultural formations and histories. As I have argued with regards to the writing of British imperial history, there has been a marked tendency in work on modern colonialism to start with the analytical assumption that the onset of colonial rule marks a clear rupture and that social change in colonial spaces is determined by the forces of colonialism alone. Such formulations have profound consequences, both for how we apprehend precolonial history and for our ability to accurately assess the ability of colonialism and modernisation to transform pre-existing economic patterns, social formations, and cultural practices.¹² Blumi himself suggests that his reading draws heavily from the work of Frederick Cooper, as well as the more theoretical reflections of Talal Asad and Louis Althusser (171). These works encourage a questioning of the assumption that imperial metropolises and European culture are the primary sources that shaped the “constant flux” of change in colonial spaces, transformations that were encoded by those locations’ “own rich heritage” as well as the particular socio-political configurations (171).

Blumi’s stress on the local also unsettles the assumption that modernisation produced a familiar and predictable matrix of infrastructure and institutions. Particularly important here is the emphasis he attaches to the role of various “middle men”, big and small, ranging from local notables, tax farmers and regional governors. He suggests that such “local intermediaries often proved to be the actual engines of change rather than being the servants of greater historical processes” or, more simply, agents of imperial control. These local powerbrokers had considerable influence because the economic vitality that characterised the Balkans in this period created new opportunities which were often more quickly recognised and exploited by these “middle men” on the ground than by agents of the imperial centre.

Racial Crossings

Such “middle men” are also central in Damon Salesa’s rich and sophisticated *Racial Crossings*, a work that suggests that racial crossings of various types were a ubiquitous feature of the cultural landscapes of British empire

building. Working in a space opened up by the work of scholars of race and intimacy like Ann Laura Stoler as well as a New Zealand historiography deeply concerned with “race relations”, Salesa’s exploration of racial formations in New Zealand in the middle of the nineteenth century traces the rekindling of racial thought in the wake of the global reorientations set in train by abolition and humanitarianism.¹³ But while this period has attracted considerable scholarly interest, the arguments in *Racial Crossings* challenge and complicate established readings of race and colonialism in the British empire. Where previous scholars have suggested that the range of imperial crises that shook British power in middle of the nineteenth century produced a “hardening” of racial thought, with a new emphasis on the essential biological differences between “races” with resulting cultural incommensurabilities and incompatibilities, Salesa demonstrates that racial thought was flexible, nimble and “promiscuous” (37). Rather than seeing a clear and neat calcification of race in the decades either side of 1850, Salesa suggests that racial ideas were subject to an almost constant reworking as they were contested, called into question, and rearticulated.

Most importantly, Salesa also challenges the assumption that imperial power invariably rested on the separation and division of races. In New Zealand, his primary focus, Salesa argues that intermarriage was not feared nor did it necessarily engender deep anxieties; rather many welcomed it as a force that would mitigate the risk of racial conflict and naturalise colonial authority. But was this not a benign colonialism, as some have suggested with regards to the supposedly superior pattern of New Zealand’s “race relations”. *Racial Crossings* challenges this “racial exceptionalism” thesis as he suggests that even the most intimate of relationships were deeply entangled with power. He argues that intermarriage was a key element of the project of “racial amalgamation” which he sees as an enduring foundation of colonialism in New Zealand.¹⁴ Here “colonial difference” was to be managed through affective ties between the races and to be “diluted” by marriage across the lines of race. Thus the affective realm became a key ground for the effective assertion of colonial power and for the containment of difference within an economic context where Maori were losing land and other valued resources and a political context where the authority of traditional hereditary leaders was undercut by the colonial state.

This strategy was, perhaps, more particular to New Zealand than Salesa allows. While he points to moments where something like “amalgamation” took shape in the Cape Colony and was discussed in Upper Canada in the wake of the rebellion of 1837, ultimately it does seem to have been an abiding part of Britain’s “imperial repertoire”, to use Burbank and Cooper’s

formulation, in New Zealand. While *Racial Crossing* presents a compelling case for the political weight of “racial amalgamation” in the New Zealand context, Salesa perhaps overestimates both its coherence and its debt to “high” metropolitan racial thought. Ultimately “racial amalgamation” in many ways cohered as a loose ideology out of a series of improvised and ad hoc responses to the shape of early patterns of cross-cultural contact and to concerns about an uncertain colonial future. The establishment of sexual and affective relationships with Europeans had been a long-standing strategy for some Maori communities and, in turn, these relationships had been central in opening New Zealand and its resources to imperial trade and subsequent colonisation. Into the 1860s it was also unclear how far British colonists were going to be able to assert either their military dominance or political authority, especially in the central North Island. Moreover, the fact that many Maori were Christian, literate and engaged with the colonial market from the 1840s raised persistent and troubling questions about the legitimacy of military power as a strategy of colonial domination. This very particular mix of factors, which are effectively explored by Salesa throughout the volume, meant that intermarriage became an important feature of colonial *Realpolitik* in New Zealand in ways that it did not elsewhere: intermarriage and “racial crossings” of other types were much less central to colonial power in the Australian colonies or in the Canadian West and there is no doubt that much anxiety fixed on the spectres of inter-racial intimacies in British India and the Caribbean during the mid-century.¹⁵

Nevertheless, *Racial Crossings* is a landmark study of the ways in which race was deployed as an instrument of state control within a modern colony. This monograph is an important part of the turn to intimacy, especially its entanglements with race, gender and sexuality, as a key zone where the lineaments and limits of colonial rule were negotiated, contested and resisted. Salesa emphasises this in the final passages of *Racial Crossings* where he sketches the significance of racial crossings to the history of Maori whanau (families) and underlines the particular importance of whanau as potent indigenous formations that were frequently capable of deflecting the most intrusive of colonial interventions. In keeping with the rest of *Racial Crossings*, Salesa’s arguments here are deft and thoughtful, but they are probably most effective when read alongside other New Zealand work on intermarriage and mixed-descent families which have highlighted the complexities of cultural difference within families as both affective and productive units.¹⁶

The Black Hole of Empire

Salesa's work can be read as a finely-grained study of how the "rule of colonial difference", which has been so central in Partha Chatterjee's work, was articulated and enacted in a settler colony. Partha Chatterjee's *The Black Hole of Empire* conversely offers another set of important arguments about how the cultural and political inequalities of empire were instantiated in India. It revisits a key passage in the transformation of British imperial endeavours in Asia and in the process offers a set of important reflections on the shifting formations of "early modernity" and "colonial modernity" that developed under British political power and cultural influence. The "Black Hole" refers to an incident that supposedly occurred when the army of the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-daulah, seized the East India Company's fortified trading establishment in Calcutta in 1756. According to British sources, a large number – perhaps 146 - of Europeans were confined in a tiny cell known as the "Black Hole" in the evening of 20 June 1756, resulting in the death of as many as 123 by suffocation. The exact number of Europeans confined, the nature of those conditions, and the total of fatalities were subject to ongoing debates as successive accounts of the event were widely circulated and routinely reiterated over subsequent decades as an indictment on the savage and brutal sensibility of Indians. But as Chatterjee shows, colonial "Black Hole" narratives were also contested by South Asians and successive generations of Bengali writers challenged British accounts and used this incident to raise questions about the connections between history and colonial power.

Chatterjee uses the "Black Hole" as a starting point for an extended reflection on the ways in which imperial conquest and power were constituted and reconstituted discursively. While this is a history firmly grounded in the buildings, presses, and public spaces of Calcutta, it is also mobile, following "Black Hole" narratives and unpacking the ideological work that they carried out. Chatterjee's history also takes his readers south to the Sultanate of Mysore and its ruler Tipu Sultan. Tipu Sultan was a feared figure in the British imagination, in part because of his French connections, in part because of the formidable military capacity he fashioned for his state, and also as a consequence of his implacable opposition to the East India Company. For Chatterjee, however, Tipu Sultan is also significant because he was an effective architect of the "early modern" in India. In Tipu's Mysore this "early modern" took an absolutist form, underwritten by the state's desire to establish its absolute sovereignty, the modernisation of its military and armaments production, and the growing efficiency of

its revenue collection and markets. Where other recent scholars stress the limits of such transformations, Chatterjee emphasises the significance of these innovations in Mysore. Chatterjee sees Tipu's state as the most potent South Asian variation of "early modern absolutism", which enhanced state sovereignty, its military resources, and its willingness and ability to intervene and direct social change. These qualities, together with a new emphasis on "effective and decisive leadership" rather than a "conservative dogma of dynastic legitimacy", meant that this marked a reordering of South Asian political traditions that was "potentially revolutionary". (92-3)

For Chatterjee this formation was particular and did not mean that "modernisation" in South Asia should have subsequently led to industrial capitalism, as in Europe. He shows that in the wake of this absolutist tradition, an alternative anti-absolutist formation took shape. This was liberal and capitalist and was at its core a "racially mixed" product of the sustained intellectual and political engagement between some Indian elites and British imperial agents. This line of thought, especially associated with Rammohan Roy, had limited spatial, temporal and social reach, in part because its emphasis on the importance of a free press and the equality of Indian and British subjects before the law challenged the very foundations of the East India Company's imperial rule (153-156).

Ultimately both of these "early modern" variants were interrupted by what Chatterjee identifies as the "colonial modern". This placed greater emphasis on racial exclusivity, closing down inter-racial intellectual engagements and dialogues between religious elites. Chatterjee argues that by the 1840s empire functioned on pedagogic grounds, and through two models only: violence, exemplified by rapacious territorial conquest, and culture, in which education, language and literature, the arts would all develop in tandem with Europeans, but on segregated lines, refracted through the lens of colonial difference. For Chatterjee, the reassertion of clear racial divisions between ruler and ruled is neatly captured in Calcutta's Town Hall shift from being a key site of public discussions and debates (such as the 1823 protests championing a free press) that brought South Asians and Britons together to its clear identification with colonial domination. This encouraged local intellectuals and political leaders to retreat from engaging with the colonial state in the manner that Chatterjee sees as characteristic of the "anti-absolutist early modern" (157). In turn, anticolonial nationalist leaders who worked hard to wrest power from British hands challenged this colonial modernity: that project, of course, was slow and heavily contested, from within and without (227). The "Black Hole" was a key battleground in that project, as Chatterjee shows that a range of Bengalis – from historians

to popular dramatists, from Muslim football fans to poets – offered rereadings of the Black Hole incident appeared from the 1870s through the 1900s.

The Black Hole successfully blends narrative history with a critical history of colonialism both as a concept and a shifting set of practices. Chatterjee treats empire not just as an idea – an object amenable to the history of ideas or intellectual history – but as a practice of power, where the actual workings of power and resistance reshaped the concept of empire. In making this argument the range of analytical sites and archival sources that Chatterjee traverses is truly impressive: he moves nimbly from East India Company records to Bengali theatre, from colonial monuments to the cultural and political history of Bengali football, from the court of Tipu Sultan to the Calcutta Philatelic Museum. Thus, in this nimble and expansive history, “empire” is not treated as a series of texts or arguments produced by influential European thinkers (as we see, for example, in the work of Uday Singh Mehta or Jennifer Pitt) or as a site for contestation between British and Indian traditions of Liberalism (as in C. A. Bayly’s fine *Recovering Liberties*), but rather as a series of repeatedly reconfigured practices deeply embedded in the formation of colonial societies on the ground.¹⁷ These traditions of colonial rule, Chatterjee argues, mean that “modern empire was not an aberrant supplement to the history of modernity but rather its constituent part” (xi).

Conclusion

Taken together these four works, each with their disparate audiences and particular analytical concerns, point to the range of contemporary work on empire and offer some compelling vantage points on the global histories of the modern age. In sum they place empire at the centre of global histories of both modernisation and modernity. They suggest that modernising projects and the culture of modernity were, in reality, much less stable and much messier than they promised to be. Modernising aspirations rarely generated neat and predictable outcomes as the adjustments necessitated by translation, the weight of local geographies and social formations, and the contingencies of circumstance all exercised some transformative power. Moreover, these works suggest that the geographies of imperial modernity were complex, with lines of influence, argument, exchange and transformation running in multiple directions and operating at a range of different scales.

While recognising the messiness of the results of the modernising projects of empire is an important step, it is in itself insufficient. Exploring Chakrabarty's distinction between modernisation and modernity is one useful way ahead. His reflections on the "muddle of modernity" make two important arguments that should frame critical reflections on empires, modernisation and modernities. First, following Aimé Césaire, he argues that in many contexts, modernisation and modernity did not go hand-in-hand. In particular, in much of Asia and Africa anticolonial nationalists argued that colonial rule failed to adequately deliver "modernisation" in the form of schools, roads, ports, and hospitals and that Europeans deliberately withheld these technologies: of course, these are arguments that sit uncomfortably with much of postcolonial criticism's anti-Enlightenment orientation.¹⁸ Second, and more broadly still, Chakrabarty warns against seeing modernity as a kind of natural destination of historical development. In stressing the need to guard against its "normative freight", he quotes Sheldon Pollock's argument that while Asian societies shaped "the material transformation that marked modernity as a global phenomenon", Asian traditions of political thought did not neatly converge with or replicate European traditions of political thought. Pollock suggests that histories of modernity's emergence have to grapple with "simultaneity without symmetry" and, equally importantly, that there "is no shame in premodernity."¹⁹ Pollock's argument is an important reminder of the importance of non-European formations in the making of the modern world and the persistent unevenness of the global landscape.

So even if empire-building was a powerful agent for modernisation at a global level, it is crucial to recognise that such endeavours were often incoherent, always in process, and effectively "unfinished business".²⁰ Enlightenment ideals of "improvement" energised the deep-seated transformation of production and social organisation within Europe and proved, as Richard Drayton has shown, to be a powerful engine of environmental and economic change in Europe's colonies.²¹ Gospels of "improvement" and progress feed an insatiable thirst for material innovation and social change. This restlessness that frequently underpinned modernisation meant that measures of success were shifting targets as technologies developed and social expectations changed: just how many miles of roads, railways and telegraph lines marked a society as modern? How many schools, hospitals, libraries and museums? And, of course, as James Scott has argued, many of the large scale centrally-planned modernising projects were terrible failures, inflicting substantial environmental, economic and social costs.²²

Not surprisingly, the cultural apprehension of being modern seems to have been an unsettled state, something that is communicated in different ways by Blumi, Chakrabarty and Salesa. Extended networks of communication and movement, the increasingly fast and expansive movement of people, ideas, and things, and new technologies and new ways of acting, speaking and being were unsettling. They called into question older certainties, fractured social orders, unsettled older ways of doing things and ways of thinking even if they generated new possibilities for some. The modern world was both exciting and terrifying, but it was not a stable state, especially in colonies where cultures collided and difference starkly encoded both opportunities and outcomes. Grappling with both modernisation and modernity – material transformations and cultural sensibilities alike – offers a valuable foundation for writing histories of modern empire building. And taking empire seriously is a vital prerequisite if we are to understand the cultural fissures and fractures that were so fundamental to the shape of the modern world that was conjured into being during the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. For one summation of the “new imperial history” see Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). A key anthology charting one key set of contributions to this field is: Antoinette Burton, *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
2. Important entrance points into this literature are: Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: the “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). Important summations of the field are offered in: Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: a Reader: Colonisers in Britain and the Empire in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, c. 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
4. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 1-19, 247-365.
5. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Muddle of Modernity,” *American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 671.
6. Chakrabarty, “The Muddle of Modernity,” 674.

7. John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: the Global History of Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); Alfred W. McCoy, Josep M. Fradera, and Stephen Jacobson eds, *Endless Empire: Spain's Retreat, Europe's Eclipse, America's Decline* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).
8. Timothy H. Parsons, *The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
9. See Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, "Beyond Identity," *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 1-47.
10. C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: the British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989).
11. Richard Wolin, "Modernity": the Peregrinations of a Contested Historiographical Concept,' *American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 741; Lynn Thomas, "Modernity's Failings, Political Claims and Intermediate Concepts," *American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 727.
12. Tony Ballantyne, "Religion, Difference, and the Limits of British Imperial History," *Victorian Studies* 47 (2005): 427-455 and "The Changing Shape of the Modern British Empire and its Historiography," *The Historical Journal* 53 (2010): 429-452.
13. Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality, and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Also see her edited collection, which features an important essay by Salea: *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
14. Following Alan Ward, *A Show of Justice: Racial "Amalgamation" in Nineteenth Century New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1978).
15. For a similar point see Sarah Carter's review of *Racial Crossings* in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 14:1 (2013).
16. For example in Angela Wanhalla, *In/visible Sight: the Mixed-Descent Families of Southern New Zealand* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2009) and *Matters of the Heart: a History of Interracial Marriage in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013).
17. Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: a Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: the Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
18. Chakrabarty, "Muddle of Modernity," 671. Here Chakrabarty is following Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*.
19. Pollock, "Pretextures of Time," *History and Theory* 46 (2007): 383.
20. Antoinette Burton, "Introduction: The Unfinished Business of Colonial Modernities," in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.
21. Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the "Improvement" of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
22. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

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