

The British Empire: Culture War and Actual War

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The flurry of criticism and counter-outrage over the classical colonial era is no mere academic matter, warns ANDREW MURRAY: what is being debated is whether fresh imperial slaughter can be sold to the public

The British empire is one of the front lines in the culture war. Few things make Establishment academics and pundits angrier than the critical scrutiny British imperialism is increasingly subjected to, particularly by scholars that aren't white, male and privileged, the characteristics hitherto regarded as essential for holding an opinion on the subject.

Historians like Niall Ferguson and Robert Tombs argue that the empire wasn't such a bad thing overall, a few undeniable excesses notwithstanding, or, as a fallback, too complex to pass judgement on. They are keener on emphasising Britain's role in abolishing slavery than its prior record of promoting and profiting from it, and its foundational part in the development of capitalism.

They also disdain the intrusion of new scholars onto their terrain. In one especially unpleasant article, Tombs singled out three for the sin of exploiting "the fashionable theme of 'anti-colonialism'," as if hostility to colonialism was a priori a historical disability.

The impertinent trio were Afua Hirsch, David Olusoga and Kehinde Andrews, all of whom are black writers of distinction. Not particularly subtle, I would say.

Most recently, the imperial case has been set out by Nigel Biggar, a moral philosopher no less, who finds the record of the empire broadly congenial in a new book. He regards a reappraisal of the empire as threatening to the present social order since any critique has to foreground issues like racism, exploitation and state violence, essential components of Britain best left unexamined lest they undermine the bromides of liberal capitalist democracy.

This is the critical point. History isn't over and, in particular, the history of British imperialism is a story without an ending so far.

When Ferguson wrote his pro-imperial history of the British empire 20 years ago, he wasn't shy about proclaiming his purpose. It was to encourage a revival of imperial methods for governing the world, on the part of the US above all, since Britain was no longer equipped to go it alone.

The "bring back the empire" brigade had its way with Afghanistan and Iraq. Twenty years on from the start of the Afghan occupation it ended in utter ignominy.

And 20 years after the Iraq invasion, a bleak anniversary marked this week, no-one can be found to excuse the aggression.

Not even the Times. Like every other newspaper worldwide in the Murdoch empire, it cheered on the Bush-Blair invasion. Yet this week it editorialised that the war was "an unmitigated disaster" and "a hubristic act of overreach, a reckless product of the American 'unipolar moment' that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"For those responsible, including in Britain, the verdict of history grows only more damning with the passage of time... We all now live with its legacy: a less stable, more dangerous world than at any time since the second world war."

The article could have been a Stop the War Coalition leaflet, in fact. Although there was no acknowledgement that the war was a disaster fully endorsed by the Times and its proprietor at the time. Anyway, imperial misadventures now turn sour even faster than they did in Queen Victoria's days.

Yet still today, the preservation of a benign understanding of the British empire seems essential to the present system: the idea that it is, and always has been, pretty much the best people could aspire to.

Its propagandists realise that when the Colston statue was pulled down, for example, this was not just a matter of an image of a notorious slave trader being removed, it was the desecration of a central prop of contemporary politics.

The whole British bourgeoisie has at least one foot on the Colston pedestal. The sanctity of our past, in the Ferguson-Tombs historical telling, is the blank cheque written to today's imperialists, cashable in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Ukraine in this century alone.

The legacy of the empire also legitimises authoritarianism, racism, and sundry other maladies, including the supremacy of the City of London in economic counsels and the overweening influence of the arms and energy monopolies.

To deride "anti-colonial" history is to sustain 21st-century neo-colonialism and the brutalisation of Iraq with its million dead, torture, sectarian strife and despoliation.

If we take one lesson from this anniversary week, let it be the importance of anti-imperialism to any serious socialist politics, from Iraq to Ukraine to Britain itself.

Obstructed: we are now as free as South Africa, Poland and Hungary

The latest figures show that real living standards for working people in Britain have now stagnated for 15 years. This is a slump entirely unprecedented in its duration.

At the same time, Britain has been downgraded in a global ranking of freedom, on account of “increasingly authoritarian” legislation, according to Civicus Monitor. New powers that restrict the right to protest have led to us being downgraded from “narrowed” to “obstructed.” We are now only one level above “repressed.”

“Narrowed,” the next level up, is a description which fits the democracy which allowed Tony Blair to take us into a war of choice ignoring public opinion. The rot runs deep.

The laws include those clamping down on the right to protest and giving police sweeping new powers — just what the Met doesn’t need this week — as well as the government’s drive to undermine civil organisations, like charities, critical of its policies.

To that could be added the fresh attack on the right to strike and legislation aimed at driving down electoral participation by the poor and the young.

It is impossible to see these developments as unrelated. As bleak economic circumstances undermine the consent of the people to capitalist class rule, coercion is intensified. Witness President Emmanuel Macron — a darling of all centrists — imposing the degradation of French pensions by decree rather than a parliamentary vote.

And Britain is in a worse state than France.

Can democracy survive capitalism in more-or-less unending crisis and the risk of a war of the great powers? This is being debated in Establishment circles, which would rather squeeze civil rights than profit margins.

The left must join the discussion and mobilise for the defence of democracy. At the moment, we are as frogs in water gradually coming to the boil.

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