Nicholas B. Dirks' The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain

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Abstract

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attitude, which holds everything in the Orient as inferior and in need of corrective study by the West. Unfortunately, King’s argument here is unconvincing. She does not engage with post-colonial analyses of the power relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. This dismissal of post-colonial studies is a missed opportunity to engage in serious dialogue and debate, which could lead to a more nuanced post-colonial understanding of the role silk played in the project of empire.

Overall *Silk and Empire* is a highly interesting historical account of a little-known area of British-Indian interaction. The glossaries of textile terms are useful and the colour illustrations do justice to the truly beautiful silks described.

Kaz Ross, *University of Tasmania, Australia*


Empire was always a scandal for those who were colonized. It is less well known that empire began as scandal even for those who were colonizers (7).

Currently the Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and History at Columbia University, ‘historian of India’ (ix) Nicholas B. Dirks’ latest book revisits relatively familiar territory for any historian of empire. Indeed, posing at the outset the question ‘how did I come to write a book about Edmund Burke and Warren Hastings?’, Dirks notes that '[t]he spectacular trial of Hastings is a natural subject for any historian of India or empire’ (ix). In *The Scandal of Empire*, Dirks ‘aim[es] to understand how the well-known scandals of the East India Company in the eighteenth century became either forgotten or subsumed within the larger and more compelling imperial narrative of an exhausted land that virtually invited the British to conquer it’ (xii). Meticulously researched and written with a real awareness of the theatrics that surrounds the birth of any empire, in *The Scandal of Empire* the trial of Warren Hastings impels a rich and fascinating reading of imperial formations.

Yet, although ostensible central to the work, the public outrage that surrounded Hastings’ own fall from grace, and the myriad scandals that brought him before the Parliamentary committee appointed and chaired by Edmund Burke serve primarily as the background to an examination of what Dirks terms ‘the scandal of empire’. That, he goes on to argue and to demonstrate conclusively, is the essential production of the trial, which lasted between 1786 and 1795: ‘For in the scandals of empire we see not just the basis for the creation of British imperialism, but also the origins of modern understandings of corruption, sovereignty, public virtue the market economy, the bureaucratic state, history, and even tradition, the final repository of scandal for the empire’ (5). The trial serves thus as pretext to a much more complex and interesting enquiry. Dirks writes, in the chapter entitled ‘Scandal’: ‘the drama is not primarily about the excess of scandal, as fascinating as it is, so much as it is about the constitutive character of scandal for empire...’ (31).

The scandal centred on Burke’s determination to bring Hastings to account for his misdemeanours while in charge of the East India Company, and of Britain’s ‘India’. As Burke saw it, Britain’s quasi-divine duty to civilize the heathen corners of the world, preferably those with some pecuniary reward to offer in return, was being seriously undermined by the excessive greed and amorality of individuals such as Paul Benfield and Warren Hastings as Company agents in India. For his part Dirks asserts in chapter 2, ‘Corruption’, that Burke’s decision to bring Hastings to
account for his actions in India, and through him the actions of countless others 'seriously on the take' (63), aimed to cleanse the imperial enterprise of the taint of behaviour such as Hastings' (85). For Dirks, though, their behaviour was less an aberration than the forerunner of imperial Britain's dealings with its colonies; he proposes that Burke's decision to pursue Hastings sought to reauthorise the meaning of British imperialism.

In the end, Burke's legacy was the transformation of company raj into British imperium. Through his role in shaping the reforms and then in impeaching Hastings, Burke managed to rescue the imperial mission, transforming corruption into virtue, private malfeasance into public good, mercantile disgrace into national triumph (314).

According to Dirks, through the endlessly rehearsed performances of Hastings' corrupt ways and Burke's burning desire to erase them from the work of the East India Company, the British empire actually consolidated itself as a force for good, intent on delivering to India (and in time the world) a better deal in its dealings with Britain. The irony that The Scandal of Empire highlights, familiar though it is, is one worth repeating for it provides still the imprimatur to modern variations on the imperial mission. That irony, of course, is that while the British empire finds its purpose in the very means it wanted to amend – the corruption at the heart of the East India Company – the stated aim of the trial was to eradicate from public discourse the sort of behaviour Burke believed Hastings had naturalised in India as quintessentially British: '[b]y the late 1760s, there was not an Englishman in Madras who was not seriously on the take...' (63).

In a sense, then, by picking on Hastings Burke took on more than he could handle, for the British lacked both the inclination and the ethical motive to change their ways in India. India was for the taking, a point that even Burke in time came to accept. However much he railed against the excesses of men like Hastings, Dirks says that Burke's was a narrow and self-interested posture: 'Despite much rhetoric that claimed the suffering of India as "fellow-citizens", it is hard not to read Burke's words as anything other than his desperate concern to keep the scandals of the East firmly outside the borders of Britain' (79). In scope and intention, The Scandal of Empire echoes thus the work of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Edward Said, concerned as it is with examining what are in effect the discursive foundations of empire per se. Dirks writes:

The history of how Hastings and Burke made modern Britain is also the history of how they made Britain modern [...] At the same time that Britain's political right to claim sovereignty over India was secured, the economic basis of Britain's interest in India became transformed by the conversion of private trade into imperial commerce (131).

Dirks concludes the chapter entitled 'Economy', arguing that: 'Ultimately, the story of the emergence of the modern global economy depended on the emergence of political conditions that, in effect, allowed trade to be free for the colonizer and unfree for the colonized, and these conditions were inseparable from the growth and consolidation of European empire in the nineteenth century' (165).

In many ways the thesis Dirk proposes has long been argued by many other historians of empire and more recently by cultural critics working within postcolonial studies. All have developed variations of the view that the colonies, and India most of all, served as a foil for the creation of imperial Britain and then of modern Britain. Like Dirks, they all have also seen the empire abroad as a precursor to capitalism, a process synthetized most acutely in slavery. Dirks himself dedicates the study to
Edward Said and Bernard Cohn (xviii), but to their names one could add those of Water Rodney, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Paul Gilroy, Gauri Viswanathan and Gayatri Spivak, among others. The real impact of Dirks' book resides in the way he is able to establish an almost seamless link between 'scandal', 'corruption', spectacle', 'economy', 'sovereignty', 'state', 'history', 'tradition', and 'empire' by relating each of these categories to the trial of Warren Hastings. The naturalization of those relationships remains, after all, the greatest success of the discourse of empire, then as now. Through careful use of an astounding range of primary materials, Dirks has written a fascinating and persuasive account of the fabric of imperial formation by re-evaluating the meaning and function of scandal in the articulation of imperial power and economics, framed by the scandalous energies of human greed, venality, and fallibility.

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Note
1 Slavery epitomizes the contempt for the world outside Europe's borders that Dirks explores in detail in its British dimension.

SOUTHEAST ASIA


This attractive monograph is the second in the TANAP series on the history of Asian-European interaction. Taking advantage of the immense volume of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) archives found in The Hague, Jakarta, and elsewhere, a cohort of scholars have been trained in the Netherlands with the goal of producing a series of studies combining European and local sources. Ota Atsushi's Changes of Regime and Social Dynamics in West Java focuses on a period of Banten's history for which there is no recent systematic study.

This monograph has seven chapters, the first two of which describe the geographic, demographic, political, and social setting around 1750. The next five chapters proceed chronologically. Chapter three assesses the Banten Rebellion from 1750-1752, concluding that the rebellion ended because local elites and elements of the royal family decided to cooperate with the VOC to advance their own interests. Chapter four covers the early years of Dutch colonial expansion between 1752 and about 1770. The VOC was politically dominant, but guaranteed the sultan's economic privileges in a comparatively peaceful period that witnessed the introduction of systematic pepper production.

Chapter five examines the declining financial power of the sultanate because of a marked diminishing of pepper production and the concomitant benefits for local elites in Banten's interior and Lampung during the period from 1770 to 1808. Chapter six continues to examine the fortunes of local populations outside the centre in Kota Banten. The expansion of the Canton trade in pepper and sugar created new networks of Chinese and English traders, which undermined the existing Dutch system relying on treaties with rulers, further diminishing the power of the VOC and the sultanate but often benefiting local elites. Chapter seven describes how the standardization of a village-based administrative colonial government began between 1808 and 1830. The traditional elite was gradually replaced by middle-ranking indigenous