

Review of Elizabeth Buettner's *Europe After Empire: Decolonisation, Society, and Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2016

When I joined the UCL history department in 2007, my then colleague Catherine Hall was engaged in a hard-fought and sometimes ill tempered debate with representatives of an older and more traditional approach to imperial history. Much of the disagreement centred on the extent to which empire was a feature of metropolitan political, social, intellectual and cultural life. The advocates of the New Imperial History argued that, far from being a peripheral aspect of the domestic workings of European polities, the practice of imperialism was fundamental to the way in which nations were constituted, citizenship contested and identities forged: a methodological inversion that saw empire not just as something that Europeans did to, or imposed upon others, but as central to the formation of the 'self'.

Whilst disputes about the validity of these insights rumble on, the enormous volume of high-quality historical research that has been produced on the domestic impact of empire means that for a younger generation of scholars, it is both natural and obvious to explore the relevance of empire at home, even if much work remains to be done to finesse its significance in different areas, not least, for example, in the often overlooked area of economics. What is striking, however, is that the vast majority of the scholarship in this area continues to focus its attention on the late nineteenth-century, and to draw upon the British case as the most compelling example demonstrating the resonance of empire in the domestic sphere.

Elizabeth Buettner's *tour de force* therefore comes as a doubly welcome publication. First and foremost, the book takes giant strides into the still relatively under-populated field of decolonisation studies by extending similar research questions and methodologies about the domestic importance of empire to

the post-1945 period of decolonisation. As things stand, whereas European empires were usually acquired in incremental steps, often on the back of decisions taken by imperial entrepreneurs at the periphery, and rarely with a significant degree of public debate in the metropole, many historians increasingly accept that empire was imbricated in multiple layers of cultural and social life. It is a curious thing, therefore, that the far more abrupt, often controversial and sometimes humiliating withdrawal from empire has not been subjected to the same scrutiny by cultural and social historians.

Secondly, and equally importantly, Buettner's book advances an increasingly important comparative dimension in the study of decolonisation, which recognises that although the history of each European nation – its colonial practice, and the life worlds of different locales throughout the empires – were all in certain senses different and distinct, there are nonetheless structural features that connect them. The shift towards a modernising or developmental colonialism after 1945, efforts to forestall formal decolonisation or to create hybrid forms of sovereignty through federation, and perhaps above all the challenge posed by immigration to racially homogenous conceptions of nationhood and citizenship, are factors that offer immense scope for comparative study.

Buettner pursues these agendas with great intellectual agility and, even allowing for the richness of her theoretical frameworks, a pleasingly readable and engaging style of writing. The book is organised into three main sections. The first offers an overview of the politics of decolonisation from the perspective of the coloniser, covering the British, Dutch, French, Belgian and Portuguese empires. The chronological range of these chapters differs in each case, with the purpose of enabling the reader to understand the ways in which ideology and politics in the late colonial period provided the context within which immigrants were later received. The second part of the book develops the theme of immigration and the rise of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural societies. The third section considers the politics of remembering

and forgetting empire, the evolving, contested histories in which, as Buettner points out, postcolonial intellectuals have frequently had to struggle against the whitewashing of the colonial past in the face of the public's mixture of postcolonial amnesia - or perhaps selective and often rose tinted remembering - fed by a steady flow of often jingoistic popular history writing.

In addition to the centrality of the colonial past to contemporary conceptions of citizenship, nationhood and collective identity, Buettner's overarching goal is to demonstrate the importance of a connected history that analytically contrasts the experiences of coloniser and colonised within a comparative analytical framework. Even if the present book still leans towards the British and French experience, Buettner has shown what can be achieved not simply by juxtaposing extensive case studies of the Dutch, Belgian and Portuguese empires, but by interweaving archival materials from all five empires within the thematic chapters.

The book is a remarkable achievement: a testament to what can be produced when linguistic range and a monumental amount of archival research are tethered by a historian of great intellectual imagination. It should be read, not simply by scholars of decolonisation, but anyone interested in the making of the modern world.