(Re)Writing History

Pankaj Mishra, Niall Ferguson, and the Definitions of Empire

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When writing about the construction of the Orient, Edward Said illuminated and examined the mechanisms of self-definition via othering within imperial narratives. He thereby exposed the underlying binary oppositions and hierarchical value-systems that sustained the power-structures, socially as well as culturally, that were part of the foundational grid of the European empires. ¹ Said’s Orientalism is, of course, not the only text that relays the ambiguity and contestedness of the colonial and postcolonial constructions of imperial selves and imperial Others. ² Said’s seminal text has, however, become one of the cornerstones of the discourse of empire, a discourse that does its best to answer the question of how ideas of empire were in fact constructed, and how we today, who see ourselves in a post-imperial present, imagine our imperial pasts. It is understood that the answer to this question is crucial not only for historical recording but also in matters of present-day communication, curriculum, and legislation, since how we define our past materially influences how we conduct our present.

The discourse about empire is thus, fundamentally, a range of arguments meant to establish what really took place, and how that is to be interpreted.

and understood. Due to the geo-political scope, the opposing sets of interests, and the permanence of the European empires, defining ‘what happened’ remains a matter of continuous disagreement. This makes the number of texts available that attempt to answer the question impossible to list; however, there is one recent text that proclaims to take on the task of answering what empire was in a way that is easily accessible to the reader, Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization, The West and the Rest* (2011). In the following, I will take a closer look at Ferguson’s answer to what empire was, by focusing on three parts of his discussion: labour and production; land-acquisition and property rights; and his perspective on insurgence, both intellectual and not, as a harbinger of structural change. In examining Ferguson’s text, I will take Pankaj Mishra’s review in the *London Review of Books* into account, and consider whether Mishra’s scathing condemnation of the text is in fact a valid response.

As mentioned above, contemporary debates about empire see the ambiguity of empire as a firm fact of discourse, ensconced in scholarship, and part of public debate; yet, rather than being a residual of celebratory imperial narratives, the strict definition of empire as unreservedly good is by no means passé. *Civilization, The West and the Rest*, a “sweeping narrative” of imperial history that is meant to tantalize a younger audience, shows clearly that scholarship’s definition of empire is not without a very vocal opposition. This “sweeping narrative” is meant to counteract what Ferguson sees as three decades worth of unsatisfactory historical education, where

young people at Western schools and universities have been given the idea of a liberal education, without the substance of historical knowledge. They have been taught isolated ‘modules’, not narratives, much less chronologies. They have been trained in the formulaic analysis of document excerpts, not in the key skill of reading widely and fast.

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5 Skidelsky, “Niall Ferguson.”

6 Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Allen Lane, 2011): xix. Further page references are in the main text. Ferguson then refers to Alan Ben-