British (Post)Colonial Discourse
and (Imagined) Roman Precedents

From Bernardine Evaristo’s Londinium
to Caesar’s Britain and Gaul

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There has been much debate about the comparability or non-comparability of empires across time and space. In Tensions of Empire, for instance, Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler invite inquiry into “the extent to which the colonizing projects of different states at different times influenced each other, giving rise to common colonial structures” despite the numerous incongruities and variations that have existed between them. Ultimately, the extent of influence is deemed sufficient to validate (cautiously) comparative approaches. Although Cooper and Stoler concentrate on the European colonial empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they also suggest that broader inter-imperial comparisons are legitimate.

1 I would like to express my thanks to the editors of this volume, to the two anonymous peer reviewers as well as to the members of the Münster research colloquium ‘Postcolonial, Transnational and Transcultural Studies’ (especially Mark Stein, Caroline Kögler, and Markus Schmitz) for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Any errors remaining are, of course, entirely my own.


3 Cooper & Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony,” e.g., 13, 28, 30–31, 37.
in the future. At the same time, they stress the distinctness of modern European colonialisms, both from earlier forms of “conquest, exploitation, and subjugation” (because the former were in notable tension with contemporaneous ideals of a “universal public good” – for instance, regarding liberalism, citizenship, and social rights) and from intra-European marginalizations of internal or neighbouring peripheries (e.g., because the latter often envisaged a lesser degree of difference and a higher possibility of full integration of the margin into the mainstream).

However, they also concede that at times there are indeed plausible points of comparison, and that “the extent to which models of rule passed back and forth across different kinds of imperial territory should be examined.”

Empires in World History, a more recent comparative study co-authored by Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank, confidently includes both modern and ancient empires within its broad scope.

Observations on inter-imperial influences, which to some extent already featured in Tensions of Empire, are now expressly said to include Rome’s influence on later imperial powers: Burbank and Cooper assert that Rome left behind “a powerful imperial imaginary” that “became a reference point for later empires” – “Romans created an imperial vocabulary, institutions, and

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4 Cooper & Stoler, “Preface,” Tensions of Empire, ix.
5 Cooper & Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony,” 1, see also 10, 23, 37.
6 Cooper & Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony,” 10; see also 23. One of these remarks directly follows a comment on the question of whether intra-European imperialisms like the Habsburg one may be compared to overseas imperialism. It is thus clear that the “different kinds of imperial territory” also include intra-European ones.
7 Jane Burbank & Frederick Cooper, Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2010). The terms ‘ancient’ and ‘antiquity’ have rightly been problematized because, as with ‘classical’, they have often been used in a hierarchizing manner to imply a special venerability and superiority of Greek and Roman culture (James I. Porter, “Introduction: What Is ‘Classical’ about Classical Antiquity?”, in Classical Pasts: The Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome, ed. Porter [Princeton NJ: Princeton UP 2006]: 13; see also 1, 11). My use of ‘antiquity’ and ‘ancient’ has no such hierarchizing implication. Here, they are used only as loose conventional terms of periodization to mean those times in European and Mediterranean history which predated the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century BCE, or which predated the onset of the (likewise problematically labelled) ‘Middle Ages’. Such terms are only retained here for want of better alternatives (parallel to Porter’s own usage on pages 26, 31, 44).