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A History Of Colonialism That's More Angry Than Accurate

Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire, by Caroline Elkins. Knopf, 896 pp., \$37.50.

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Hating the British Empire is nothing new. Indeed, it has been the primary occupation of the academy since about 1960. Not without exceptions, of course. The prolific Jeremy Black's *Imperial Legacies* of 2019 reminded readers of the British Empire's political and social benefits to subject peoples. The very naughty economic historian Tirthankar Roy of the London School of Economics has obstinately pursued empirical inquiries, such as his recent *An Economic History of India 1707–1857*, showing the economic benefits and strong local support for colonialism in the granddaddy of them all, British India.

Nonetheless, every hint of dissent from the academy's jealously guarded anti-colonial orthodoxy elicits hysterical reactions from the guardians. My own minor contribution, a 2017 peer-reviewed article "The Case for Colonialism," had to be withdrawn with my consent due to death threats to the journal's editorial staff after a cancel campaign led by Farhana Sultana of Syracuse University.

In the United States, the temple is guarded by many Ivy League professors, none more vigilant than Harvard's Caroline Elkins. Unchastened by criticisms of *Imperial Reckoning*, her bizarre defense of the murderous Mau Mau movement in colonial Kenya, and of her participation in a nuisance lawsuit by "survivors" of the apt British response that was widely supported by Kenyans, she now applies the lather to the British Empire as a whole. The good news for the young historian is that Elkins's latest book represents the nadir of the interminable fall of objective colonial history. There is a golden opportunity awaiting the aspiring scholar to rewrite essentially everything that has been published on European colonialism (with notable exceptions) in the past six decades.

Elkins makes clear at the outset of *Legacy of Violence* that she views all use of force by colonial states as illegitimate because colonialism itself was, in her view, illegitimate.

“Coercion was central to initial acts of conquest and to the maintenance of rule over non-consenting populations.” Just 17 words, but three very serious claims. One might just as well, and with more evidentiary backing, state: “Cooperation was central to initial acts of conquest and to the maintenance of rule over consenting populations.” Elkins is not much interested in the various native empires and tyrannies that European colonialism replaced, nor can she explain the threadbare European presence in most colonies, which were run by and for the natives. Having earlier ignored the doughty black participation in the anti-Mau Mau counterinsurgency in Kenya, she cannot help but avert her gaze from similar evidence in the empire as a whole.

Nowhere in the book does Elkins provide a definition of “violence” that could be therefore present or absent, nor any definition of justified versus nonjustified violence. We never are told what levels of response to political violence might be justified because the answer for “illegitimate” colonial rulers is always: none. We never hear from the natives who fought for the colonial state. We never hear from the tens of millions of native victims of anti-colonial movements, whether before, during, or after colonial rule. Most inexcusably for a historian, Elkins never explains her methods for data selection. We never hear any reflection on why, if the colonial rulers were engaged in such wrongdoing, they recorded it so earnestly, challenged it when it was seen as disproportionate, and wrote lengthy reports on it after the fact. As such, lacking either logical or empirical justification, Elkins is free to do what lawyers do: make a case and hope that no one notices the defects.

The head-spinning catalog of distortions and moralizing that follows will require sustained critique. One example: the emerging communist insurgency in Malaya in 1948. There, according to Elkins, Henry Gurney oversaw “a police state” with the alarming ability to arrest criminals, levy fines, and impose “the death sentence for a range of offenses,” including terrorism. The leader of the insurgency, known as Chin Peng (actually, his name was Ong Boon Hua), was a freedom fighter, in her telling. The 41,000 native policemen and 250,000 native auxiliaries who signed up to combat the insurgency were not evidence of the legitimacy of colonial rule. Rather, they showed that “Britain was throwing massive weight behind the forces of law and order.” The British wanted to cling to Malaya “for economic resources” such as tin and rubber, not to save the people of Malaya from communism. Odd that one of Gurney’s major policies was the creation of a pan-ethnic Independence of Malaya Party. Clever ploy.

In fact, Ong's domestic support was nil beyond a small band of Chinese radicals who, as he later wrote in his memoirs, were motivated by "Chinese patriotism" and "international socialism." This had zero appeal to the Malay, Indian, and even Chinese communities in the colony. Ong's jungle fighters ambushed Gurney's car north of Kuala Lumpur in 1951. Gurney died in a hail of bullets, drawing fire from his driver and wife, who hid in a culvert with his dead body until help arrived. "Dead in one of the empire's remote, roadside gutters," in the enthusiastic telling of Elkins. He had it coming, after all. A "trademark mustache punctuated his ever-present scowl." The day of his assassination, he was heading for "a weekend of colonial leisure" in a "Rolls-Royce" with "crown insignia." Presumably, the graduate students gathered on the library floor for colonial horrors story hour are expected to gasp with each salacious detail. Levying fines! A mustachioed scowl! Colonial leisure (whatever that is)!

Ong was eventually exfiltrated to Beijing via North Korea in 1960 as his movement collapsed into ideological schism and Stalinist purges. For Elkins, it appears a great pity that his movement did not succeed. Anyone taking potshots at the Tommies is, in her view, always on the side of justice. Were Elkins to ask a Malaysian or Singaporean today, she would find those poor ex-subjects still laboring under the violent "colonial" idea that not being taken over by a communist tyranny was a good thing. A leader of Malaya from the Indian community who would become independent Malaysia's ambassador to the United Nations, Radhakrishna Ramani, said this of Gurney's death at the time: "This should not merely be the end of another great man. This must be the beginning of a renewed determination to steel our hearts and strengthen our hands to end such dastardly crimes forever, and with the greatest possible speed." Ramani represented the people of Malaya. Ong did not. You won't find Ramani mentioned in Elkins's book. She is too busy relishing the thought of Gurney's riddled corpse in a gutter.

Elkins has been sedulous in torturing the archives. It's a pity because, as a result, none of her research is worth a penny. A mean-spirited suspicion coats each and every artifact she unearths. She is wholly unreliable as a reporter, and future scholars will have to return to every document she cites knowing that she cherished their inability to talk back. The book's pretension to theoretical innovation with a new concept called "legalized lawlessness" is silly and will be quickly forgotten.

Elkins makes clear that were she to write a history of any other European empire, the results would be the same. In Germany's Southwest Africa colony, she expostulates, there were "extremes of violence" that "snowballed in Germany's empire and informed fascism's advance." Again, three major claims, none of which withstands scrutiny. In particular, the

claim that the Nazis arose from colonialism, an irresistible idea for modern academics, is ludicrous for historians of the Third Reich. The claim is merely asserted using a lazy citation to fellow Ivy League professor Isabel Hull of Cornell who “tells us” it is so. A citation to a fellow traveler in the academy is not evidence. Hull will later write books with phrases like, “As the historian Caroline Elkins tells us...”

Fellow Harvard historian Jill Lepore blurbs *Legacy of Violence* as being “carefully researched,” while Stanford historian Priya Satia, awed by the “staggering research,” blurbs the “fearless brilliance and prodigious skill in the historical craft” of the author. Like Elkins, Lepore and Satia think of history as source material for their ideological crusades. History has thus become a branch of literary theory, scouring the past for source material with which to engage in Victorian moralizing encrusted in dense jargon about “othering” and “controlling the body.”

In the final chapter, Elkins slips into cultural commentary with a full-press indictment of modern Britain. It is a country the “configuration of white power” of which includes such monstrosities as the Royal Institute of International Affairs, which she misnames the “Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs,” and leaving the European Union. There are odes to Black Lives Matter and an analysis of the Iraq War. For good measure, she voices her opposition to “monarchy, hierarchy, and racial exclusion.” Hierarchy? This intellectual incontinence is apparently what happens when a Pulitzer Prize is awarded.

Not to leave out her American readers, and in a kind of crescendo intended to alert the audience to cue for their standing ovation, we get attacks on Trump, police, and the idea of sovereign borders. The timpani begins with an ode to Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, and then, the concert cymbals crash with an insistence that her own agenda must be imposed “sometimes peacefully and other times forcefully.” Are you on your feet? So am I, heading for the exits.

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