ways, from terms of identification that were in circulation when the encounters occurred. For example, Abulafia's 'Europeans' identified Caribbean and Canary islanders as 'barbarians' (or, more precisely, as various cognates of this term). They did not, however, identify them as 'primitive' or 'Stone Age', for those were perceptions of a later historical moment – one that emerged only after the shift from a degenerationist to a developmental view of the overall trajectory of human existence through time. Thus, when Abulafia – in his discussions of how 'Europeans' perceived these various islanders – alternates between using 'barbarian' and such latter-day social evolutionary terms as 'primitive' or 'Stone Age', he mistakenly suggests an equivalence between these terms and 'barbarian', as this latter term was used and understood at the time of the encounters. He thus blunts, rather than sharpens, our understanding of the late medieval and early modern meaning of 'barbarian'.

While Abulafia's use of social evolutionary terms will jar with some readers, his use of 'European' is more likely to be overlooked, since this usage, although also anachronistic, is fully in line with accepted conventions of historical writing. Yet, however well established it may be to speak of 'Europeans' when depicting an era before the term became commonplace, the use of this term similarly blunts our comprehension of historical particularity. To see oneself or another person as a 'European' requires, at once, a sense of 'Europe' as a geographic unit and of its inhabitants as a 'people' – and these are anything but trivial or innocent notions. On the contrary, their emergence was part and parcel of the racialization of human variation. Projecting 'Europeans' back into the encounters of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries assimilates those encounters to the world that followed them historically and, in so doing, pre-empts examining how those encounters themselves contributed to the making of 'Europeans' and other racialized groupings.

While the terms of identification that Abulafia deploys are not historically motivated, a second possible basis for their use is that they depict the objective facts of the encounters, independent of how anyone living at the time understood them – in the same way that we can say that some item of food eaten at the time of the encounters yielded so many calories, even though no one then alive measured or recognized 'calories'. Yet, for the use of 'European' to stand in this way – as an objective truth, let us say – would require showing that racial/continental groupings do in fact exist independent of their fabrication as social facts. And this would require addressing and dismantling the considerable scholarship that has shown us the historicalness of such groups in general and of 'Europeans' in particular. Similarly, for the use of social evolutionary terms to stand in this way would require taking on more than a century of anthropological critiques of social evolutionary theory – extending from Boas to Levi-Strauss to Sahlins – in order to demonstrate, for instance, that social orders that have a reliance on 'stone tools' are, beyond this, of a common type. None of this daunting work of social theory is attempted in this book, however.

As a final observation, I note that Abulafia joins those scholars who define themselves, at least in part, by using 'post-modernism' as a whipping-boy. Thus, following a now much-rehearsed formula, Abulafia offers as an exemplar of 'post-modernism' a brief quotation that is deeply incomprehensible – at least as he cites it. He then adds, as a punch line, that the surest means of understanding the quotation is to 're-read Hans Christian Andersen's "The emperor's new clothes"' (p. xvi). In fact, the more usual approach of historians – that is, checking the source, to see if the quotation makes sense in its original context – is a route that Abulafia himself pre-empts, since he cites no source and names no author. This is unattractively smug. More importantly, what is overlooked here is that even the most readable prose, when it is produced and offered without a careful scrutiny of its own terms of representation, can equally serve as a hindrance to an effective dialogue with the past. In the case of Abulafia's own book, for instance, there is a great deal of valuable material struggling to be heard over the confusion produced by just such pseudo-accessibility.

Imperial formations

Edited by Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue. Advanced Seminar Series. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 429. Paperback US$29.95, ISBN 978-1-930618-73-2.

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doi:10.1017/S1740022809003192

In recent years, the topic of empire has become all the rage. Major new syntheses from Anthony Pagden, Felipe Fernando-Armesto, and John Darwin

offer it as a unifying theme of world and comparative history. Meanwhile, monographs are rolling off the printing presses. To some extent, this reflects a post-Cold War effort to grapple with the historical analogies for our age: do we live in a unipolar era? Is Rome the precedent? Or should we think in terms of an emerging decentred set of systems of regional emporia? Gone are the underlying idealist polarities of socialism and liberalism. What we have now, it would appear from the flurry, is the triumph of the reasons of state – a vogue for what political scientists call realism.

In all this quest for new universal coordinates to make sense of the big picture, what is often left out are the histories of the colonized, who more often appear as the bit-players or stage-setters for emperors from London or Beijing. What *Imperial formations* sets out to do is to challenge this formulation, to insist that empires are formed out of asymmetrical relationships between social and spatial parts, and do not simply radiate from the mind's eye or the interests of a centre. Moreover, these relationships belong to – and change – a set of belief systems about civilization, space, and race. The big-picture dichotomy of realist and idealist impulses is a false one.

This book is the product of a series of workshops sponsored by the School for Advanced Research in New Mexico, and to some extent builds on the pioneering anthology *Tensions of empire*, edited by Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper. It goes further in important respects and does not presume that empire was a western European phenomenon: the Chinese, Ottoman, Russian, and Japanese emporia join the pantheon.

What motivated the participants was a desire to grapple with 'the degrees of tolerance, of difference, of domination, and of rights' that inhere in empires. Indeed, as the editors argue, they prefer the coinage 'imperial formations', to capture the dynamic of relationships between parts, over 'empire' as a thing. It is certainly a suggestive proposition and should be aligned with some of the big syntheses as a challenge for how to conduct a more global history. *Imperial formations* is an important contribution and a corrective to propensities to see empires with core values, interests, or institutions that simply radiate outwards, with varying capacities to fill further geographic spaces as colonies.

But does it work as a volume? Not really. The result is a book that is less than the sum of its parts. Indeed, it is a book of parts. There are wonderful essays, from Makdisi's fine-grained examination of American protestants plying their bibles in the Ottoman empire, or Jane Burbank's sweep across centuries of Moscovy's habitus of creating flexible legal mechanisms to cope with far-flung and highly variegated regions and faiths, to a couple of essays about Chinese efforts to promote the idyll of racial homogeneity while trampling on and promoting its benevolence to near and distant parts (such as Tibet). Then there is a set of essays looking at the ways in which imperial ideologies or self-conceptions wracked their architects and rulers – from Irene Silverblatt's study of the Spanish Inquisition in early modern colonial settings, to Nicholas Dirks' analysis of the dust-up over Warren Hastings and the significance of scandal and moral outrage in late eighteenth-century Britain, and ending with Fred Cooper's essay on the tension between imperial subjecthood and republican citizenry in France since the Haitian Revolution.

Most of the case studies are illuminating essays in their own right. But the result is a bit of a pastiche. The essays rarely 'speak' to each other. Few authors bother with the concept of 'formation', though in spirit and execution there is some tacit consistency. The section headings are arbitrary (if well turned): what does, for instance, the title of the last cluster of essays, 'New genealogies of empire', really mean?

In the end, this is a book that tends to particularize each case. One is tempted to ask if this reflects the nature of the collective venture: to get away from universal postulates with which we are all too familiar, and to examine the negotiated and contested features of empire, are we inevitably bound to push the analysis inwards and make the narratives much more introspective? It is telling, for example, that 'formations' are almost entirely endogenous: no essay, the introduction included, deals with empires in relationship to each other, as highly porous, invidious, competitive, emulative, and therefore unstable constructs; this, despite the fact that Part 2 is purportedly about 'Rethinking boundaries, imaginaries, empires'. The result is paradoxical: a series of discrete, bounded studies that reify what the editors appeared to have sought to transcend.

Possessing the world: taking the measurements of colonisation from the 18th to the 20th century

By Bouda Etemad. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007. Pp. ix + 250. Hardback US$85, ISBN 978-1845453381.