

Reviews

Drawing the global colour line: white men's countries and the international challenge of racial equality

By Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp x + 371. Hardback £45.00, ISBN 9780521881180; paperback £17.99, ISBN 9780521707527.

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Drawing the global colour line is a landmark work of transnational history. In the book, two outstanding Australian historians – Marilyn Lake, who has been a leading figure in the development of feminist history, and Henry Reynolds, who has been pre-eminent in exploring the grim history of the colonial destruction of the aboriginals – break new ground, both methodologically and substantively. They provide us with a truly global history of racial politics at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

The last two decades have seen the growth of the study of 'whiteness' as a major area of scholarly endeavour. This has represented an extremely valuable deepening of our understanding of race. Yet much of this work has been conducted within national frameworks. In particular, partly because the lead has been given by American scholars, the work in the field has typically been US-focused. On the other hand, while there has been an increasingly sophisticated body of writing on race within the British Empire, this has often been framed either within a specific regional context – such as that of India – or in a way that treats developments within the British territories in isolation from the politics of other states and empires.

Lake and Reynolds' achievement is to cross these boundaries, showing how racial ideologies and

responses to them traversed the world; how developments in British colonies interacted with those in the United States; how Australia provided a model of defensive racial politics for settler communities around the world; and how the rise of Japanese military power was crucial in the development of the Anglophone world's perceptions of race.

Particularly brilliant is the handling of the interaction between the work of racial ideologues, practical politicians, and institutional mechanisms. This is beautifully captured by the authors' description of Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, rising to speak in parliament in favour of the White Australia immigration policy, carrying in his hand a copy of the book *National life and character*, Charles Pearson's prophecy of the extinction of white dominance in the world. At the beginning of *Drawing the global colour line*, the authors promise to 'trace the transnational circulation of emotions and ideas, people and publications, racial knowledge and the technologies that animated white men's countries and the strategies of exclusion, deportation and segregation, in particular, the deployment of the state-based instruments of surveillance, the census, the passport and the literacy test' (p. 4). They deliver on this undertaking with aplomb. A practice such as the use of literacy tests, for example, is traced from its origins in America (as a way of disenfranchising black voters) through to its use by British colonies as a technique to exclude immigrants of colour without imposing an overtly racial criterion. The book demonstrates how racial ideologues in different parts of the world constantly drew on each others' ideas and practices: their actions were informed by a sense of being part of a common project of maintaining white racial dominance.

The way in which Lake and Reynolds draw the connections between American and British imperial developments is particularly innovative. They make a cogent case for the immense influence of the British scholar-diplomat James Bryce's 1888 study

of the US polity, *The American commonwealth*, a work that became a key text for the builders of the Australian confederation and for other colonial statesmen. The authors demonstrate how Bryce's acceptance of the, by then, conventional American opinion that the post-Civil War reconstruction, with its attempt to integrate black Americans into the political mainstream, had been a disaster provided the basis for his view that ethnic homogeneity was essential to the success of democracy. And, behind the ideas of Bryce and his contemporaries, they trace the highly effective popularization by the Oxford historian E. A. Freeman of the notion that the capacity for democracy was an inherently Anglo-Saxon attribute.

Although Lake and Reynolds recognize the importance of Darwinism, they avoid the mistake of thinking that all turn-of-the-century ideologues of whiteness accepted white dominance as inevitable or biologically programmed, or that the politics of the era can simply be extrapolated from the existence of 'scientific' racism. The work of Pearson – an Oxford-trained scholar who pursued a political career in Australia – is especially striking in this regard. His prediction was of the rise of successful Asian and African challenges to the dominance of the West. His work not only rang alarm bells for White Australia enthusiasts but crucially exercised a direct influence on the thinking of Theodore Roosevelt, helping to generate his insistence on the need for the US to develop an imperial mission and his fear of the rise of Japan in the Pacific.

Lake and Reynolds are surely correct in portraying the racialization of the late nineteenth-century world as centrally bound up with the construction of white settler democracies. Especially in Australia, the Transvaal, Natal, British Columbia, and California, the idea of building a white man's country became central to the identity of the new polities. Driven by white workers' fear of the competition from cheap labour provided by people of colour, shopkeepers' alarm at the competition from Asian merchants, and political elites' ideological investment in racial doctrines, organized movements waged complex campaigns of exclusion against Asians, ranging from violent attacks on the gold fields and docksides, through administrative obstruction of immigrants, to legislative bans on immigration. Lake and Reynolds are astute in their discussions of the tension between the raw settler racism of the 'white men's countries' and the desire of Whitehall to maintain a semblance of equality before the law. Although British metropolitan leaders of empire such as Joseph Chamberlain

were embarrassed by the settlers' attempts at overt racial legislation, and urged the settler governments to avoid legislation that mentioned race explicitly, in the end they capitulated to the politics of settler colonialists. In Lake and Reynolds's memorable phrase, they 'came out' as white men.

The authors show an acute sensitivity to the gendered dimension of settler colonial politics – the new states were envisaged as white *men's* countries in a quite direct way, despite their often relatively early extension of the female franchise. The rhetoric of assertion against the metropolis was one of the rights of manhood – themes of hardiness and masculine independence were common. The authors are engagingly humorous on this topic. (Interestingly, although Lake and Reynolds do not really discuss this, their evidence suggests that the rhetoric of national manhood was also adopted by Asian nationalists.)

As well as exploring the ideological strands of racism, Lake and Reynolds provide a brilliant political narrative, which identifies the interaction between the new racism and the global emergence of anti-colonial movements. Gandhi's career in South Africa is a crucial case in point. The anti-Asian measures introduced in Natal and the Transvaal were the focus of Gandhi's first campaigns and the background to his formulation of the philosophy of *Satyagraha*. Gandhi began his political career as a convinced supporter of the benefits of being a British subject. And, indeed, the relative success of his activities relied on his ability to exploit the tensions between settler colonialists, Westminster politicians, and the viceroy's government. However, the tendency of the London authorities to side with the settlers in the end drove him to an anti-imperial position. Meanwhile, the exclusion of Japanese immigrants from California radicalized political attitudes toward the US in Japan. The victory of Japan over Russia in 1905 destabilized the Western sense of superiority, and it was crucial to Theodore Roosevelt's decision to send the American 'Great White Fleet' around the world in 1908 – largely a warning to the new Asian power. As Lake and Reynolds show, this action intensified the racialization of world politics: in Australia, with disillusion over Britain's lack of strategic commitment to the national defence setting in, the visiting American sailors were hailed as new partners in racial solidarity against the Asian threat. The 1919 Paris peace conference, and the Wilsonian rhetoric that accompanied it, raised Asian hopes of a new era of international egalitarianism. But when those

aspirations were dashed, especially with the rejection by the Euro-American powers of Japan's demand for an explicit statement in favour of racial equality, a new impetus was given to anti-Western radicalism. The global institutionalization of racial politics culminated in the 1920s, with the imposition of intense forms of racialized immigration exclusion by the Western powers and their colonies.

Overall, this is a stunningly good book, written with a clarity and directness that is all too rare in contemporary academic prose. While one is never in doubt that it is the work of two committedly egalitarian scholars, it eschews moralism in favour of analytical complexity. Figures who are deeply unsympathetic from almost any contemporary standpoint, such as Bryce or Jan Smuts or Teddy Roosevelt, are nevertheless rendered in a way that makes their thinking comprehensible.

I have a few, relatively minor criticisms. In the book, anti-colonial actors tend to be presented in a rather unitary way. The authors give a great deal of weight to W. E. B. Du Bois' early and advanced anti-colonial positions but, before the First World War, Gandhi's more reformist vision of empire was perhaps more typical of Asian and African intellectuals. And the elements of scepticism about nationalism itself among some important Asian intellectuals are somewhat neglected. A consideration of Rabindranath Tagore's critique of nationalism, and an engagement with the anti-modernist elements in the thought of Gandhi, might have served to introduce greater complexity into the picture. There is also, at the end of the book, perhaps too bland an account of the triumph of racial egalitarianism in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. It can be argued that, in practice, 1948 actually saw a retreat from the League of Nations' attempts to protect oppressed groups, in favour of an acceptance of the claims of national homogeneity. The Declaration, after all, followed shortly after the horrors of Indian partition, which signified that the end of colonialism was not necessarily the dawn of a new era of global justice.

I suspect that the book will be greeted with a certain amount of puzzlement by some of its readers. For all the calls for transnational history that we hear, historians are still very much invested in national frameworks of explanation. A book that so radically departs from such comfortable ground – and the narratives (often of a highly moralistic kind) that play out on it – is disconcerting. But to do transnational history is to disrupt such comfortable familiarities, and this book is one of the few

that genuinely moves beyond thinking within the framework of the nation-state.

The devil's handwriting: precoloniality and the German colonial state in Quindao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa

By George Steinmetz. Chicago studies in practices of meaning. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xxviii + 640.78 b/w illustrations, 6 maps, 3 line drawings. Hardback US\$90.00, ISBN 9780226772417; paperback US\$33.00, ISBN 9780226772431

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Using social theory as the starting point for a new history and a new understanding of colonialism does not offer a shortcut, but neither does it take the reader on a detour. George Steinmetz is both a committed sociologist and a passionate historian, and his rich and challenging study on German colonialism in Samoa, the Chinese province of Quindao, and Southwest Africa not only provides a fruitful merging of three influential theoretical approaches (Edward Saïd, Pierre Bourdieu, and Homi Bhabha) but also demonstrates the lasting value of 'grand narratives' and comparative approaches in colonial studies. Nonetheless, avoiding a bird's eye view, Steinmetz 'does not attempt to identify any singular, general model of colonial rule' (p. 3). On the contrary, *The devil's handwriting* is founded on the obvious and crucial differences of colonial rule in the three colonies under investigation, ranging from preservation to extermination, and from idealization to disdain. 'Native policy' is therefore the central analytical object, the most important field of investigation in Steinmetz's study: 'Native policy encompasses the core activities that differentiate the modern colonial state from other state forms' (p. 41). He is concentrating on four major questions and basic assumptions, that is, the influence of 'precolonial ethnographic discourse and representation'; the importance and mechanisms of 'symbolic competition among colonial officials for recognition of their superior ethnographic acuity'; the (often underestimated) 'colonizers' cross-identification with images of the colonized'; and, finally, different 'responses by the colonized' (p. 2).