



Bob Moore, Henk van Nierop. *Colonial Empires Compared: Britain and the Netherlands, 1750-1850.* Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2003. 204 S. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-0492-1.



Reviewed by Daniel Becker

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2004)

B. Moore u.a. (Hgg.): Colonial Empires Compared

Colonial Empires Compared is, in many respects, an odd compilation; perhaps not surprisingly, as it derives from an Anglo-Dutch historical conference and thus carries the ballast usually associated with such enterprises: the individual contributors have dealt with the overall topic in their own idiosyncratic ways, and little communication seems to have taken place among them, or at least most of the writers assembled here have not bothered to revise their papers for publication by incorporating whichever additional insights the debates at the meeting may have yielded. In short, the volume contains five sets of two essays of varying degrees of quality and sophistication which hardly ever refer to their respective counterparts directly. A coherent invitation to consider the virtues of comparative history, as the introduction claims, this collection is most certainly not.

To begin with, the volume lacks clear editorial oversight and rigor. While this may be the case with most published conference proceedings, the ones under review stand out as a particular curiosity: not only do neither of the two editors neither of whom is a specialist in the field contribute to the volume, but they have even left the in-

roduction to yet another scholar, Stephen Conway, who has written no other piece in this book. Moreover, that Conways introductory summary of the various chapters takes the unusual liberty of declaring one of the contributions as largely misguided should definitely caution the reader not to take the claim to overall coherence all too uncritically.

Indeed, most articles make little contribution to comparative history. They focus on either the British or the Dutch empire and consign themselves, at best, to figleaf footnotes covering the respective other case. But the comparative perspective Conway sees enshrined in the juxtaposition of the two essays in each of the volumes five thematic subsections does not work out simply because these two complementary pieces only very rarely correspond to one another. For example, the first part treats Anglo-Dutch relations from both perspectives, with essays by H.M. Scott on British views of Dutch domestic strife, and by Niek van Saas on the changing logic of neutrality in Dutch diplomacy but the two articles treat consecutive, not contemporaneous time periods. Likewise, the second part, which approaches the

British and Dutch empires through the lens of the cultural history of representations, falls apart into one essay, by Glynis Ridley, on British perceptions of their (predominantly white) American settler colonies on the one hand, and one, by Angelie Sens, on the debates surrounding the (in)humanity of the non-white peoples the Dutch encountered overseas, on the other. And the two articles in the fifth section, by P.J. Marshall on Britain and Jur van Goor on the Dutch in Asia do not really match simply because the former takes a metropolitan domestic, the latter, however, a peripheral approach. Granted, greater congruence exists between the articles on military and economic aspects of empire N.A.M. Rodger and Jaap R.Bruijn on the English and Dutch navies, and H.V. Bowen and Edwin Horlings on investment in and economic exploitation of the colonies but it derives mainly from the different contributions orthodox methodology which eschews many of the fascinating recent developments in the field.

These criticisms aside, I would nevertheless like to mention three essays in this volume that point to the potentials of a comparative analysis of European colonialism. For example, H.M. Scott's opening essay on the British representative in the Low Countries, Sir Joseph Yorke, combines biography and politico-cultural history in a wellargued miniature. Scott shows how the breakdown of the longstanding Anglo-Dutch alliance in the third quarter of the eighteenth century derived not only from a shift in the relative balance of power between the two states, or from the reconfiguration of European and imperial politics following the mid-century diplomatic revolution, but also from the failure of the British to grasp the true nature of the changing internal dynamics of the Dutch Republic. Caught in a traditional view of a conflict between stadholder and the provincial oligarchs as the main politico-cultural dynamic, Yorke and, following his reports and advice to London, the British government failed to understand the oppositional potential of the Patriotic movement, whose growing strength eventually toppled the pro-British attitude of the Dutch government and moved it decisively out of the British orbit. (p. 31)

Angelie Sens's article on Dutch Debates on Overseas Man and his World, 1770-1820 synthesizes the Dutch variant of Enlightenment debates surrounding the encounter with non-Europeans. In particular, Sens highlights three controversies: the Ape Debate, centering on the conundrum that Black Africans had, allegedly, more in common with apes while, allegedly, Orang-Utans seemed to espouse man-like qualities; the disputes

around slavery, in which the dominant argument maintained the inherent inferiority of Blacks to Whites, and a debate about the sensibility and potential of missionary activities. As in other contexts, these discourses oscillated between outright racism and, if one may call it such, a benign, paternalistic Orientalism, and created, in the long run, an evolutionary view of human history which the Dutch shared with most of their European contemporaries. Sens's article provides a concise, synthetic overview of this topic in English, which may have been fruitful to expand for a genuinely European comparison. In how far, one might ask, for example, did the Dutch debates mirror the discourse of the German Enlightenment and of German Idealism at the time?

Finally, I would like to point out the contribution by P.J. Marshall, who displays his usual mastery of the vast literature on the British Empire in an article dedicated to the role of the state in the formation and administration of empire in the first decades of the Second British Empire. Before the American Revolution, Britain had left the control of its overseas territories largely to private or quasi-private companies and other organizations. The loss of the thirteen colonies forced the government seriously to rethink its stance in these matters, attempting to exert more direct influence and control. This process of asserting metropolitan political authority moved slowly and was only fully accomplished in the second half of the nineteenth century. Within the framework of this historical development, Marshall argues against recent scholarship, which takes the move toward greater centralization as a sign of a general modernizing trend of the British state, that what little enhanced control existed in the first half of the nineteenth century emanated not from a modern or modernizing administrative/bureaucratic apparatus, but from those pillars of ancient régime England, parliament and the courts of law, precisely the institutions which the thesis of the modernizing state claimed had lost importance in the political modernization of the empire.

This is, at the very least, good food for thought. Unfortunately, none of the other authors take up on it. Consequently, the important issue of the matrix within which the old institutions of the European dynastic state and the new forces of imperial bureaucracies worked toward the creation of the modern European (nation-)state and the modern global system, an issue that would lend itself well to comparative analysis, remains untackled in this volume. And a crucial related question also remains largely unanswered, i.e. how the profound changes in European political cultures, worldviews, and conceptions

of the state affected the emergence of the modern imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, changes which manifested themselves most notably in the time period covered in this book. In sum, the volume lacks a critical mass of substantial, thought-provoking contributions. Instead, it provides a prohibitively priced and poorly edited example of the kind of conference proceedings of which historical scholarship has little need. One would hope that not too many libraries waste their scarce resources on such projects.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Daniel Becker. Review of Moore, Bob; van Nierop, Henk, *Colonial Empires Compared: Britain and the Netherlands, 1750-1850*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=19014>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.