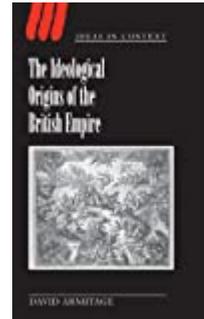




David Armitage. *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire: Ideas in Context 59.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xi 239 S. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-78978-3; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-59081-5.



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An Empire Imagined

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Considered as an intellectual construct, the so-called First British Empire possessed an impressive pedigree. Its progenitors included historians from classical antiquity, medieval scholastics, Renaissance humanists, and theologians on both sides of the Reformation's schism. Cicero, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Richard Hakluyt the younger each played a part in its conception, as did both Cromwells (Thomas and Oliver) and James VI and I. Yet, despite this lineage, the fully articulated concept of the British Empire that Pitt embraced, Hume criticized, and Jefferson repudiated lasted barely half a century. For a brief period during the eighteenth century's middle decades, it was the normative community with which Britons throughout the Atlantic identified, in London no less than Glasgow, Dublin, Kingston, or Philadelphia. Even at its apogee, however, the British Empire meant different things to different people. Buffeted from the 1760s onward by the twin forces of American independence and Britain's "swing to the East," the empire shed many (though hardly all) of the characteristics that had originally defined it. When most people speak of the

British Empire today, it is usually the nineteenth-century successor empire in Asia and Africa that they have in mind.

So David Armitage depicts the early modern formation of Britain's imperial identity in his fascinating new book, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*. Following a path blazed by J.G.A. Pocock, P.J. Marshall, Colin Kidd, Kathleen Wilson, Sir John Elliott, Richard Koebner, Jack P. Greene, Steven Pincus, Nicholas Canny, and many others, Armitage achieves a remarkable synthesis. The British Empire's ideological origins, Armitage maintains, lay in its self-conception as an extensive polity at once "Protestant, commercial, maritime and free" (p. 195). In tracing the origins of this concept, Armitage emphasizes three crucially important points: that the "concept of the British Empire" originated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a means to describe "the Three Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland," that a more extensive definition that included the Caribbean and North America was largely the work of "creole elites and imperial officials" during the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and that, even after "an in-

tegrated concept of the British Empire ... became dominant” during the 1730s, the concept did not go “unchallenged,” either in Britain proper or in Ireland and the colonies (pp. 7-8).

The most impressive feature of the *Ideological Origins* is its temporal and spatial reach. In addition to considerable archival research, the book draws on scholarship covering nearly two centuries of British and Atlantic history, including all of England, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as North America and the Caribbean. Given Armitage’s propensity for making unexpected connections—an article published several years ago paid simultaneous homage to the high Victorian imperialist J. R. Seeley and Joan Wallach Scott[1]—this scope is hardly surprising. Still, the aplomb with which Armitage spins a coherent narrative from such widely dispersed material is striking.

Of Armitage’s various intellectual debts, none is more intriguing than the one suggested by his book’s title. Despite its extraordinary influence, Bernard Bailyn’s *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) has spawned few imitative titles. The most likely explanation for this relative absence is the United States’s peculiar claim to be a nation founded on an ideal (or set of ideals). By arguing that the British Empire also had an ideological origin (or origins), Armitage implicitly opens the possibility that the ideas discussed in his book played the same sort of instrumental role that they do in Bailyn’s account. However, Armitage is careful not to push this analogy too far. In the introduction, he writes that his purpose is “not to claim that the origins of the British Empire can be found only in ideology” (p. 5). Likewise, the book’s final chapter, which delineates the British Empire’s transformation during the late 1730s from contested ideology to widely accepted “identity,” comes close to making ideas of empire the causal agent but again stops short. As Armitage explains in the introduction, “an origin can be either a beginning or a cause” (p. 5). Although clearly tempted to attribute the latter meaning to the British Empire’s ideological origins, he ultimately settles for the former, adding as a further qualification that by ideology he simply means “the transferability and the contestability” of Britain’s imperial self-conception (p. 195). For Bailyn, ideology produced “rebellion,” “transformation,” and an irresistible “contagion of liberty.”[2] By contrast, Armitage concludes that, because Britain’s understanding of itself as an empire was never universally accepted (either in Britain or in Ireland and the colonies), the most one can say is that it is “a classic example of an identity that was originally an ideology” (p. 198).

In the main, Armitage is wise to hedge his conclusions in this manner. For a brief period between the late 1740s and the onset of the American Revolution, the imperial ideology (or identity) whose origins Armitage so deftly narrates did assume a transformative, programmatic quality in Britain. Although this greater British ideology/identity was entirely consistent with Parliament’s successive attempts to tax the American colonists, its underlying dynamism was not unlike that which Bailyn attributed to American revolutionary ideology in the years before the Declaration of Independence.[3] Perhaps the most striking part of the British Empire’s conceptual ascendancy in Britain, however, was the rapidity with which metropolitan Britons abandoned it. Following France’s recognition of the United States, Parliament enacted a new Declaratory Act (1778), renouncing forever its right to tax Britain’s colonies for revenue and effectively ending any possibility that the extra-European territories of the British Empire might become part of an integrated national community in the manner envisioned by Armitage’s projectors. Although the American Revolution lies beyond the scope of Armitage’s book, this transformation ultimately confirms his argument. Even at the height of late Victorian and Edwardian imperialism, the British Empire was at best a “virtual nation”—a global community that, despite its commercial and strategic integration, retained many features of the early modern composite state (or empire) from which it had evolved.[4]

In places, Armitage’s references to the secondary literature are less extensive than one might wish. No doubt, related considerations of length and cost are partly to blame. Had Armitage cited every source from the enormous literature to which his book relates, the result would have been a volume far too expensive for course adoption or—in some cases—library acquisition. Still, several omissions are surprising. Foremost among these is the absence of any discussion of J.G.A. Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment* (1975), despite a lengthy section on the English/British reception of Machiavelli’s corpus, especially the *Discorsi* (pp. 125-45, *passim*, and 155-6). Although not all of Pocock’s admirers (or critics) have read—let alone understood—his famously difficult magnum opus, it would have been helpful for Armitage to clarify how his own interpretation differs.

All in all, however, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* makes a contribution of the first importance to the ongoing attempt to write the history (or histories) of the early modern British Empire and the British Atlantic world. By bridging two centuries, three dynas-

ties, and four geographically distinct subdisciplines, each of which has all too often been studied in isolation from the others, it lays down markers that British historians will henceforth need to address. By its very contentiousness, Armitage's book is certain to stir debate; because of its geographical and chronological reach, that discussion is likely to be widespread. These are all considerable accomplishments and make this latest addition to British and Atlantic history welcome indeed.

Notes

[1]. David Armitage, "Greater Britain: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis?," *American Historical Review*, CIV (Apr. 1999): 427-45.

[2]. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), chs. 4-6.

[3]. Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2000), intro. and ch. 4 (esp. pp. 146-7); see also H.T. Dickinson, "Britain's Imperial Sovereignty:

The Ideological Case against the American Colonists," in *Britain and the American Revolution*, ed. Dickinson (London, 1999).

[4]. Eliga H. Gould, "A Virtual Nation: Greater Britain and the Imperial Legacy of the American Revolution," *American Historical Review*, CIV (1999): 485-9. Obviously, abandoning the right to tax colonies of settlement for revenue did not mean that the British Empire ceased to be an authoritarian polity—quite the contrary, especially in India and Britain's other non-European territories: see P.J. Marshall, "Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, XV (1987): 105-22.

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