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The colonial past is never dead. It’s not even past: Histories of Empire, Decolonization, and European Cultures after 1945

Abstract: History writing about empire is thriving, although few could have predicted this in the 1980s, when the field was moribund. This article examines the history and historiography of post-1945 empires and decolonization, observing how international and economic developments, combined with changes to the history profession, revived the field in the 1990s. From this resurgence emerged the “new imperial history,” with its focus on imperialism and culture, although some debate whether Europe ever developed a “colonial culture.” The essay assesses recent works on the legacies of empire and decolonization that indicate what we know about colonial culture at this juncture, and how it should be studied. It also identifies obstacles like missed collaborations between postcolonial studies and history writing, and terminological issues, including problems with the label “new imperial history.” The essay concludes by indicating directions for future research: into the forms of decolonization; toward greater inclusion of the “smaller” empires; toward fuller comparison of cultures and empires; and into migration’s effects on Europe.

Stepping off the tram at one downtown stop in Brussels back in 2002 or 2003, I noticed two men in a scuffle, one black, one white. It don’t know what started it, but my impression was that an accidental bump on the crowded platform set the white man off. I couldn’t hear their exchange as they confronted each other before parting ways, but there was no doubt what the white man yelled at the black man as he walked off, no more than a few meters away: “macaque!” – “monkey!”

One could interpret the white man’s outburst as a remnant of Belgium’s colonial past, meaning Europe’s “age of empire” had somehow lived on into even the 21st Century. Of course the colonial era sensu stricto is long over, the global community having embraced the principle of self-rule for all countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the former Belgian Congo. The idea of any foreign country directly ruling any part of Africa, Asia, the Americas, or Europe for that matter is anathema. Yet the colonial past is still with us in the form of

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colonial mentalities, memories, and other “hangovers” of empire. A white man calling a black man a “monkey” in public in Brussels was not only shocking, it had a specific colonial resonance. Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, improvising part of his June 30, 1960, independence day speech before gathered dignitaries – including Belgium’s King Baudouin – declared, “Nous ne sommes plus vos macaques!” “We are no longer your monkeys!” Lumumba himself had been publicly insulted a few years earlier when a European woman yelled “sale macaque!” at him after he accidentally bumped into her on a Leopoldville (Kinshasa) street.

Many scholars now consider legacies of empire and decolonization to be not only important to European attitudes, identities, and cultures but in ways ubiquitous in everyday life. It is thus in retrospect surprising that colonial culture took so long to become a subject of historical inquiry. To address this and other issues, this essay begins with a sketch of the post-1945 history and historiography of empire before reflecting on what we can say about “European colonial culture” at this juncture, as well as how to study it. The essay highlights three state-of-the-art works by Bill Schwarz, Elizabeth Buettner, and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe, and Gabrielle Maas, each of which differs from the others in its line of attack. The essay concludes by identifying several areas where significant and interesting work remains to be done.

**History and Historiography of European Empires**

The end of formal overseas empires is one of the great stories of the post-World War II era. Alongside the Cold War’s apogee, nuclear weapons, a global population boom, the information age, the advent of the Anthropocene, and the Soviet Union’s demise, decolonization was central to the second half of the 20th Century. Europe’s massive overseas empires collapsed spectacularly in just three decades. Despite much violence, the 1950s and 1960s were hopeful years, with political independence having been achieved or restored in India (1947), China (1949), and then across most of Africa, the Middle East, and the rest of Asia. It was a sign of the times that many called the 1960s “the decade of Africa”.

During this same post-war era, history writing about nineteenth and twentieth century overseas empire remained limited. As history writing centered on the (formerly) colonial world waxed in the 1960s and 1970s, scholarship on the history of imperialism waned, or at least regarding Britain and France, two empires for which a significant historiography had developed. In other cases such scholarship had never taken off, for instance the history of Belgian colonialism, which
had not attracted much attention within or beyond Belgium.\textsuperscript{1} For years, Angelo del Boca struck a lonely figure among Italian historians and historians of Italy as he produced studies about that country’s African colonialism. As to Germany, scholars dwelled on questions of Nazi empire rather than the country’s earlier ambitions in Africa, China, the Near East, or the Pacific. Into the 1970s Portugal’s “third empire” remained current affairs. In general, the historiography of imperialism was weighted toward Europe’s “first” overseas empires, such as the Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (V.O.C., United East India Company), Britain’s seventeenth – eighteenth century empire, or the French in India and the Americas, with an emphasis on economics, strategy, diplomacy, and colonial administration. For some, this made the field rather conservative, even dull. The discipline had become so moribund by the early 1980s that David Fieldhouse asked whether imperial history, fallen and broken like Humpty Dumpty, could be “put back together again”.\textsuperscript{2}

It is telling that some who paved the way for a renaissance of the history of empire beginning in the late 1980s approached it either from other fields of history or other disciplines entirely. Edward Said, author of the hugely influential \textit{Orientalism} (1978), was from the field of literary studies, for example. But why a revival at that point in time? By the late 1970s, an economic downturn, a decline in commodity prices, neo-colonialism, and development problems had taken the shine off early expectations in the formerly colonial world, and some turned to the past for explanation. Post-war and post-colonial immigration into Europe from Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia had swelled the numbers of non-European immigrants, stirring memories and raising new issues. The post-1989 lifting of the Cold War refocused attention on imperialism as a framing global construct, as did growing concern with unbridled U.S. “imperial” power. A kind of coming to terms with World War II and the Holocaust – think of Jacques Chirac’s 1995 speech recognizing the French state’s responsibility in the Holocaust – freed up intellectual space and energy to revisit the misdeeds of colonial rule. Many scholars had turned from social history and Marxist theory toward anthropology, structuralism, and Michel Foucault for insights on power. Stuart Hall and the emergence of cultural studies in the U.K. and the flourishing of literary and postcolonial studies steered in the direction of a “cultural turn”, bolstered by post-structuralism and

the so-called linguistic turn. The rediscovery of Antonio Gramsci propelled Subaltern Studies and the interrogation of silences in the archive. All this had historians not merely using gender, race, class, and nation to understand the past, but questioning those very categories and terms. Many thought these insights could be usefully applied to the study of recent empire.

Thus did the “imperial turn” or “new imperial history” arrive. The imperial turn invites scholars to emphasize representations of power (social, cultural, political), networks and flows of people and ideas, gender, race, language, identity, knowledge formation – including “colonial” knowledge – and to question the nation-state as a tool to understand the past. Dipesh Chakrabarty pushed to “provincialize Europe” by decentering Eurocentric theory and historical knowledge, undetected after-effects of the “age of empire”. A central text was Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler’s *Tensions of Empire*, which called for studying empires within a “single analytic field”. Rather than see the metropole at the center with colonies “out there”, they should be viewed within one space, even if, as I have argued elsewhere, it remains important to recognize distinctions between metropole and colony (or colonies) and among empires, making the single analytic field more appropriate in some cases than others. At this point numerous works – I think of Gary Wilder’s *The French Imperial Nation-State* or Antoinette Burton’s *Beyond the Imperial Turn* – have challenged the idea that empires were relatively uncomplicated two-sided exchanges with “Europe” (or Britain, or France, etc.) a kind of unassailable beast extending its tentacles outward to command and reshape the world. Still, this presumption continues to underpin some of the most recent scholarship in postcolonialism.

Academics at work in the U.S. and Britain were at the forefront of the “new imperial history” as it emerged against the “old”, and debate centered mainly on

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the British empire before spreading, in particular to address France and its erstwhile empire. Many working in other contexts, for example in Germany or Portugal, did not take up many of its tendencies or embrace its leading authors. While the imperial turn led to a more cosmopolitan historiography of empire, intellectual currents and theories circulated and were embraced in different ways in different countries. The ambit grew further with renewed interest in the “old” landed empires of the Romanovs, Ottomans, and Habsburgs. Scholarship moved beyond intersections of empire, culture, and society to embrace intra- and inter-imperial transfers, commonalities of structures, and the management of imperial formations including the handling of diversity.\(^8\) Ambitious scholars have extended their optic geographically and temporally across world history, resulting in magisterial accounts. John Darwin’s global and comparative After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires (2008) insists on the clout of non-European empires to the late 1700s and how Europe’s control in the Americas and India revolutionized international relations, economics, and culture to reorder the global balance of power. Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank’s Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference (2011) explores “technologies” of imperial rule and how empires dating back to Rome managed difference among subject peoples (or failed to do so). Such global views, literally and figuratively, raise the question as to what “European” empire was, in practice or otherwise, or if it existed at all.

**Maximalists and Minimalists: Culture and Empire**

One of the most vibrant sub-fields in the resurgence of empire studies has been culture and imperialism. From one standpoint this is unsurprising because people long believed overseas empire and culture were necessarily intertwined, the diffusion of culture being fundamental to the so-called civilizing mission. Education spread European languages and values, and thus (for example) Kamara Laye at the end of his memoir L’enfant noir (The Dark Child, 1953) – written in French – leaves his home in French Guinea on a Paris-bound flight to continue his education. Urban design and architecture in colonial cities like Tsingtao, New Delhi, Tripoli, and Hanoi disseminated European ideas about rational planning, hygiene, aesthetics, and racial hierarchy. Missionaries extended the realm of Christendom, and so today the world’s largest church, the Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, is found in Yamoussoukro, Côte d’Ivoire. That these cultural transfers were long

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thought to have been one-way explains why it took so long for European “colonial culture” to garner much scrutiny. The inattention was itself a symptom of imperialism: Westerners presumed a superiority making their cultures immune from great influence. Sure, colonial issues affected diplomacy and economics, yet national narratives by master historians downplayed the significance of empire to European politics, society, or culture. Even specialists long rejected the idea that empire influenced people’s everyday lives, two writing that in the French case, “Frenchmen remained stubbornly indifferent to colonial affairs [...] they became colonialists only in a moment of national crisis.”

Research over the past three decades has shown us otherwise. A key text is Said’s Orientalism, which revealed how Europe and its study of the Orient said more about the former than the latter. Rather than Europe being a fixed “thing” that projected itself overseas to distant lands, and that then knew those places and peoples as a result, Europe had been defined through imperialism – in particular the production of knowledge – and knew itself in reference to non-European “Others”. Not only did experts misapprehend their own knowledge about the world “out there”, it was the rest of the world that defined or shaped Europe rather than the other way around.

Pioneering work on cultures of empire focused on Britain, a milestone being John MacKenzie’s Propaganda and Empire. As an Africanist, MacKenzie (like Said) came at the history of imperialism as somewhat of an outsider. His scholarship unveiled ways in which empire became so fundamental to British culture that it went largely unnoticed, be it in literature, theater, film, board games, advertising, postcards, or expositions. Works that followed – including many in the Studies in Imperialism series at Manchester University Press that MacKenzie founded – showed how the empire had “come home” in myriad ways, in some ways “making” Britain in fundamental respects.

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passed 100 volumes, commemorated by Andrew Thompson’s *Writing Imperial Histories* that reflects on the state of scholarship and MacKenzie’s legacy.14

Studies of the “imperial experience” in other cases followed, for example in that of France, its empire, and culture.15 Interest in Germany’s overseas empire grew, jolted in part by work coming out of U.S. German studies programs, sometimes home to German scholars, for example the late Susanne Zantop. The interdisciplinarity and openness to cultural and postcolonial studies of such programs showed in the work of Zantop, Lora Wildenthal, and Marcia Klotz, among others, who unearthed how empire (real or imagined) affected Germany; for instance how colonial intermarriage influenced German citizenship laws, how colonial tropes reinforced a Weimar-era sense of victimhood, and potential links between colonial genocide and the Holocaust.16 Works by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Alex Keese, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, António Costa Pinto, Juan B. Vilar, and Andreas Stucki have extended the optic to the Iberian empires of the 1800s and 1900s, as others have for Italy.17 Essays in Vincent Viaene, Bambi Ceuppens, and David Van Reybrouck’s *Congo in België* and my own work have taken up the Belgian case.18 MacKenzie himself then embraced this growing cosmopolitanism by producing *European Empires and the People*, whose essays invite comparison of the “imperial experiences” of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Germany.19

Many agree empire profoundly (re)shaped European cultures, but not everyone. One can identify “maximalists” and “minimalists”, the former of whom see

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14 Andrew S. Thompson (ed.): *Writing Imperial Histories*. Manchester 2013.
19 John M. MacKenzie (ed.): *European Empires and the People. Popular Responses to Imperialism in France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy*. Manchester 2011.
empire prevalent in European cultures, from artwork to literature to self-identity to notions of race, class, or gender. Maximalists in the French case believe it impossible to understand French conceptions of citizenship or republicanism without understanding how empire molded them. Maximalists in the French case believe it impossible to understand French conceptions of citizenship or republicanism without understanding how empire molded them.20 One can point to foods with obvious colonial connections (Banania in France, tikka masala in England), everyday consumer goods from tropical (i.e., colonial or formerly colonial) regions (tea, sugar, palm oil, cocoa), to knowledge, its production, and its ordering. Major institutions like the British Museum or Antwerp’s Institute for Tropical Medicine owe their very existence to overseas expansion. The development of European sciences is in many ways inseparable from colonialism. Fenneke Sysling has shown how, “Dutch anthropology was shaped above all by its empire in the east. [...] The first half of the twentieth century may well be considered the heyday of Dutch anthropology, partly thanks to the colonies that provided opportunities for more research in this period.”21 Academic disciplines like anthropology emerged not prior to and somehow “above” the colonial situation before radiating outward to the world but simultaneous with and from the colonial experience.22

Minimalists downplay the significance of empire. To the contention that the imperial experience somehow constituted “Britishness” or “Britain”, John Darwin counters in Unfinished Empire that:

contrary to what is sometimes suggested, Britain was not in any obvious way a product of empire. It was not ‘constituted’ by empire [...] its English core was already an exceptionally strong and culturally unified state (taking language and law as the most obvious criteria) long before it acquired an empire beyond Europe.23

In The Absent-Minded Imperialists, Bernard Porter examines a litany of British cultural manifestations to show how the common person took little notice of empire.24 If Europe was so imbued with empire, to follow Porter, why did enthusiasts produce so many films, put on so many exhibitions, found so many colonial

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institutes, teach the colonies in the classroom, build monuments, and create so much propaganda – and over so many years – to stimulate pro-empire attitudes? Because in fact the population remained unconvinced, unaffected, and unmoved. Less contentious is whether empire had affected Europe by the interwar era; even Porter admits the possibility that empire had made inroads into British culture by the early 1900s.\(^\text{25}\)

Porter’s book elicited lively rejoinders from Antoinette Burton, MacKenzie, and others, just as Darwin’s provoked a blistering critique from Bill Schwarz.\(^\text{26}\) Porter’s skeptical review of MacKenzie’s *European Empires and the People* has remained one of *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*’s “most read” articles online for months if not years, suggesting the intensity of the dispute.\(^\text{27}\)

The debate raises three questions about how to study empire, Europe, and their history into the post-1945 era. First there is the question of who is correct, maximalists or minimalists, a debate that at this point has played itself out. We can safely conclude it is not an either-or proposition. Of greater significance is the debate over shared understandings of what is a proper focus of historical study. Are discourse, the production of knowledge, ideas about culture, and the scholar’s position vis-à-vis his or her subject suitable objects of historical study, or should scholars study more “traditional” objects such as economics, diplomacy, and politics? A third and related argument is whether certain tools, such as particular theoretical approaches or borrowings, are useful or even appropriate. Many who have taken the “imperial turn” embrace “theory” broadly speaking whereas, as Schwarz puts it, Porter “offers an intransigently literal reading of the evidence.”\(^\text{28}\)

**Echoes, Echoes**

The above quote is drawn from Bill Schwarz’s *The White Man’s World* (2011), the first volume in a planned *Memories of Empire* trilogy. Bringing in Schwarz’s

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25 Ibid., 18.


outstanding book at this point allows this essay to turn to another key question about research into culture and empire, not whether a theoretical or empirical approach is better but whether European culture and empire are best addressed through comparative study or on a case-by-case basis. Comparison of Schwarz’s study with two other recent, exemplary works illustrates the variety of possible lines of attack as well as some of the latest findings in this field. What is more, the contrasting backgrounds of the authors and editors of these books reveal the interdisciplinarity of the study of empire and culture at this point. Schwarz, author of *The White Man’s World*, did undergraduate work in English and History at York University, graduate study at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), and is now Professor in the School of English and Drama at Queen Mary, University of London. His CCCS roots are reflected in the fact that he is both hard at work on *Memories of Empire* volumes two and three – *The Caribbean Comes to England* and *Postcolonial England* – and editor of the series “The Writings of Stuart Hall” with Duke University Press. Gabrielle Maas, Kalypso Nicolaïdis, and Berny Sèbe, like the contributors to their collective volume discussed below, approach the study of empire from different disciplines. Maas and Sèbe both took doctorates in history at Oxford. She, formerly of the Institute of Historical Research, is now an independent scholar, whereas Sèbe is Senior Lecturer in colonial and postcolonial studies at the University of Birmingham (U.K.). Kalypso Nicolaïdis, who holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard, is at St. Anthony’s College, where she focuses on international relations, global governance, and European integration. Buettner, also discussed below, is a History Ph.D. (University of Michigan) who is today Professor of Modern History at the University of Amsterdam.

The most common approach for studying empire’s cultural reverberations in the metropole is to limit the scope to one national experience. This is the approach *White Man’s World* takes. Yet Schwarz’s study is not “limited”, for his analysis is expansive and his learning deep, though he wears it lightly. Starting with Enoch Powell’s 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech that warned against postcolonial immigration to Britain in apocalyptic terms, Schwarz works backward to explore how empire made Britain in specific ways. He focuses on the “imperial experience” in England, Australia, and south-central Africa, and the development of conceptions of whiteness, which were forged on real or metaphorical colonial frontiers, for instance 1800s Australia or 1970s Rhodesia. Ideas of whiteness and Britishness then fed back to the metropole, later to be agitated through the workings of memory. Keeping the focus on one case, the British Empire, allows Schwarz the room to work through methodological problems, most prominently the mechanisms of memory and history, as well as to scrutinize particular issues or figures in depth. To point to just one example, Schwarz examines the life and
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The career of Anglo-Australian Henry Parkes, who was born in England and made a career in New South Wales. In their strivings to ensure Australia be a “white man’s country”, colonists like Parkes defined whiteness. It was more on the colonial frontier than anywhere in the metropole that such notions congealed. “Confronted by alien peoples and by an alien landscape, the white man in the colony could more fully realize himself than his counterpart in the metropole.”

England then learned “from its frontier societies how to become a properly white man’s country.” Memory later catalyzed the (re)activation of racial conceptions. Australia’s founding in 1901, for instance, passed unnoticed in Britain at the time, but memory later made the moment, retroactively, one of great import when (white) colony and (white) metropole fought side by side during World War II.

Schwarz’s nuanced, careful analysis makes it one of the most innovative and persuasive studies of empire and British culture to date. And yet a reader of White Man’s World who knew little about the subject might conclude the imperial experience affected Britons uniquely or even exclusively when in fact there are many parallels with histories of other colonial metropoles. One means to escape the limitations of the in-depth one-nation approach is to gather expert essays to forge a broad-ranging, comparative study, an excellent example of which is Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Gabrielle Maas, and Berny Sèbe’s 2015 Echoes of Empire. Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies. This co-edited book emerged from a conference, and the editors then cast a broader net to include other essays, bringing together historians of empire with students of contemporary global and European Union (EU) politics.

Nicolaïdis, Sèbe, and Maas draw our attention to obvious echoes of empire, for example in economics, but also to “places where colonial ideas live on less as practice than as pervasive mindsets or frameworks of power relations.” Not all are cultural, such as ways in which empire continues to reverberate in economic and political neo-imperialism. The volume addresses not only Europe but also the Americas, India, Russia, and China, each of the book’s four sections capped by a reflective or personal essay. The volume’s opening section examines imperialism from “the receiving end” in the Americas, Africa, and India, while a second looks at imperialistic traditions in Europe and the U.S., for instance Ali

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29 Schwarz, Memories, 145.
30 Ibid., 159.
31 Ibid., 127.
33 Nicolaïdis, Sèbe, and Maas, Echoes, 5.
Parchami’s analysis of how the British and Americans not only referenced ancient Rome’s dominion to justify their later empires, but exercised power in ways that paralleled Rome’s. Despite U.S. rejection of any label of imperialism, the Roman Republic’s idea of *imperium* – hegemony through power, not territorial control – matches U.S. conceptions of global power. The collection’s third group of essays delves into “the imperial roots of normative ambitions which buttress the EU project and the reminiscent echoes of the universalist claims which sustained imperial projects”, while a final section takes an even broader perspective with essays on empire’s reverberations in the international order, LGBT activism, and globalization, among others.

The book’s scope is global, even if most essays center on Europe, European empire, and the EU. Although most chapters are brief, almost all of them provide essential background on their subjects, a necessity considering that no reader can be familiar with all the book’s many subjects. An example is Vinícius Rodrigues Vieira’s incisive comparison of Brazil and India’s differing development trajectories in which he provides context for his argument as to how colonial legacies map onto Brazil and India’s incorporation into the world economy. Certain essays present original research on specific topics, such as Christopher Harding’s on the roots of Japan’s imperialism that links the personal and political to argue its empire was in ways inward-looking and rooted in a sense of insecurity. Other chapters are thought pieces, still others short surveys, for instance Zhu Liqun and Feng Jicheng’s essay on China’s search for identity in the face of Western imperialism, which breaks no new ground.

The volume is comparative in multiple ways, including within essays, as seen in Rodrigues Vieira’s chapter on India and Brazil or Parchami’s comparison of U.S. and British discourses on empire. Dimitar Bechev’s essay “From the Soviet Bloc to the New Middle Ages” compares three imperial moments in East-Central European history: Soviet domination, the “rediscovery” of pre-1918 empire-building, and the EU – a “post-modern” or “neo-medieval” empire to some. Dane Kennedy’s essay on “Imperial Parasitism” juxtaposes non-European and European would-be empire-builders during the late-1800s era of high imperialism. Alexander Morrison sees similar attitudes among administrators of Russian borderlands and the French in Algeria, the British in India, and settlers in the U.S. West. The volume prompts implicit comparisons by inviting the reader to draw her or his own, especially Part II’s essays on imperial legacies in the U.S., U.K., Europe, Turkey, Russia and Japan, respectively. Some chapters meditate on the EU in light

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34 Ibid., 119.
35 Ibid., 12.
The colonial past is never dead of Europe’s past colonial efforts, overseas or Continental, although neither Napoleonic nor Nazi empire enters the picture. One would be hard pressed to set down *Echoes of Empire* without being convinced empire is central to understanding the recent past and the world today. Some essays confirm what we already know – Emily Jones and Clara Weinhardt discuss the long shadow cast by the imperial past over trade relations between former colonial powers and colonies – others how colonial echoes shape European norms, or attitudes toward Africa, eastern Europeans, or LGBT people in the non-Western world. Another point is the colonial roots of European integration. Nicolaïdis calls the standard narrative of European integration, which glosses over any colonial associations, the EU’s “virgin birth” story. Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson elsewhere refer to this “foundational tale of origins” as the EU’s “Immaculate Conception”. In *Echoes of Empire*, Hansen and Jonsson argue that integration was directly connected to the “Eurafrica” project, and that the virgin birth story obfuscates the EU’s emergence from the chrysalis of empire. Hansen and Jonsson have made this argument numerous times, and here again they overstate the case. Although space does not allow a thorough discussion, suffice it to refer to one example: Belgium and the Congo. Because Belgians feared outside involvement might undermine colonial authority, they opposed any integration and staunchly defended the independence of the Congo from external interference, be it from NATO, the European community, other allies, or the United Nations. Although Belgian statesmen and colonial officials might have used the term Eurafrica, it is important not to confuse rhetoric with reality. In any case, in *Echoes*, Nicolaïdis is suggestive, urging us to take the opportunity of the post-2008 crisis moment to rethink the EU and Europe in a “non-European” world, meaning both one in which a non-European country, the U.S., predominates (one might soon add China), and mentally: to recognize the world is not the one of the past 300 years or so, dominated by Europe. More such self-awareness and self-reflexivity when confronting imperial legacies is needed to move toward more full decolonization, in the former colonial world and Europe.

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An alternative way to tackle culture and empire is the single-author, wide-ranging study, an amazing example of which is Liz Buettner’s *Europe after Empire*. Buettner is right to point out that, “[d]espite the profusion of insightful academic work about how distinct ex-metropoles experienced losing their empires and felt their legacy, scholarship concerning similar topics in different countries usually exists within a bubble, making few connections with parallel processes occurring elsewhere within decolonizing and postcolonial Europe.”39 *Europe after Empire* seeks to persuade readers “it is no longer possible to examine late colonialism, decolonization, migrations to Europe, approaches to multicultural societies, and imperial memories and legacies through a single national-imperial lens.”40 Buettner substantiates this by examining decolonization and cultures of empire in not one or two but five cases: France, Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal. The analysis begins with case-by-case overviews of decolonization with particular emphases: Britain, India, the Commonwealth, and the family metaphor; World War II and the Vichy-Free France rivalry among French colonies; Portugal and “lusotropicalism”; among others. Each early chapter makes a nod to culture in the metropole: a quick look at *Dr. No* (Britain); at Banania and Babar (France); at Hergé’s *Tintin in the Congo* (Belgium). Focus then shifts to movements of people – non-European immigration and colonial repatriates, including those of mixed race – and resultant changes to European identities and cultures. One danger to the book’s country-by-country approach is “siloing”, and *Europe after Empire* ends up presenting five national stories rather than a broad picture of Europe’s experience with the end of empire. Moments of comparison are few and far between, and Buettner leaves it to the reader to tease out comparisons. Moreover, readers looking for numerous analyses of cultural creations such as films, radio programs, novels, advertising, or theatrical productions will be disappointed.

Still, Buettner’s book is an incredible achievement. The numbers she provides on migration are a great resource. How often are we faced with bare facts, such as that 38,000 of some 88,000 Belgians fled the Congo within a month of its independence? Or that by World War II only 30–35,000 French nationals lived among some 20 million Vietnamese, meaning that during the 1946–54 Indochina War more French soldiers than colonials lived there? What is more, Buettner knows the literature. Whether it is India’s partition, the Congo Crisis, Indo-Surinamese in the Netherlands, or Portugal’s *retornados*: she has read everything. If I

40 Ibid., 498.
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could recommend one book to any student interested in this subject, it would be Buettner’s. Its comprehensiveness gives it a bit of a feel of a reference book, but the writing is so smooth and the brief forays into cultural analyses so engaging – of Luc Tuymans’s *Mwana Kitoko*, Claire Etcherelli’s *Élise ou la vraie vie*, London’s Notting Hill Carnival, Matonge en Couleurs in Brussels – general readers will enjoy it as well.

Considering *Europe after Empire* alongside *White Man’s World* and *Echoes of Empire* makes clear that one factor at work in recent years is generational change. A number of prominent scholars came upon “empire” as a historical subject serendipitously, including some leading U.S. historians. Others came from families rooted in the colonial experience, whether from having been born in a colony (e.g., Benjamin Stora, Algeria), been raised in one (John MacKenzie, Zambia), having married a former colonial (e.g., Guy Vanthemsche), or being an Indian- or British-born “child of decolonization” like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Mrinalini Sinha, or Phillipa Levine.41 The paradigms at work in analyses of empire change as the personal and temporal distance grows from the object of study. Bill Schwarz’s *Memories of Empire* represents a culmination, of a kind, of a distinguished career (he joined the CCCS for graduate work in the mid-1970s) that overlapped with the decolonization era. By contrast Buettner (b. 1967) and Sèbe (b. 1978) are 2006 and 2007 alumni, respectively of Wm. Roger Louis’s Decolonization Seminar for “young historians” in Washington, D.C. (as is the present author, 2011). *Echoes of Empire* crosses generations by including essays from newly-minted Ph.D.’s, mid-career scholars like Kalypso Nicolaïdis (Ph.D. 1993), and scholars with long careers, including Dane Kennedy, John MacKenzie, and Bernard Porter. One could extend this to find generational change at work in other contexts, for instance the historiography of Belgian colonialism. An early generation (Jean-Luc Vellut, Jan Vansina, Daniel Vangroenweghe, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, and the late Jean Stengers) was followed by another (Zana Etambala, Guy Vanthemsche), and now a whole new one has emerged including, among others, Amandine Lauro, Pierre-Luc Plasman, Véronique Bragard, Enika Ngongo, Anne-Sophie Gijs, David Van Reybrouck, and Bérengère Piret.

**Directions for Future Research**

In addition to highlighting the importance of generational change, reading Schwarz, Buettner, and Nicolaïdis, Maas, and Sèbe’s books together offers a

persuasive case for the maximalists, that is, that recent empire was transformative for Europe and its cultures. Much work still remains to be done to refine the terms of debate and to uncover basic facts. One area in need of attention is a clarification of terms. Both “imperial turn” and “the new imperial history” probably deserve to be jettisoned because they are confusing, impractical, and unnecessarily provocative. In many ways the “new imperial history” was not so new as it developed in the 1990s, considering the earlier work of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, among others. Contemporaries referred to the burst of late-19th Century empire-building as the “New Imperialism”, and many continue to do so. Because the “New Imperialism” is often the subject of the “new imperial history”, this creates potential confusion for those embarking on study in this area, for instance undergraduates. Unlike a movement or school – empiricism, the Annales, psychohistory – a “turn” implies an orthodoxy or a blanket shift; that everyone is on board, or ought to be. Many scholars indicate the imperial turn has “happened”, including Buettner. Antoinette Burton also believes so, to the point that we can move “beyond” it. The truth is, many have not taken the turn.

Other problematic terms are “postcolonial” and “postcolonialism”, words used so often and embracing so much they risk meaning nothing. “Postcolonial” can refer to the political situation in former colonies or metropoles following formal independence; it can indicate the time period after around 1947–75; it can label research examining that era; sometimes it references a critical position, yet a capacious one embracing many problems and approaches. Considering the term’s many connotations and almost boundless applicability, postcolonial studies is paradoxically restricted: it is situated mainly in literary studies, many historians pay it little heed, and it is overwhelmingly anglophone, and only to a limited extent francophone. Considering that many scholars of postcolonialism will be the first to admit we continue to live in a world shaped by imperialism – thus anything but “post”-colonial – another term or terms might be in order, even if, as Robert Young notes, no one has found a better one yet.

To outsiders it must seem odd there are only modest mutual influences and overlap between postcolonial studies and the historiography of twentieth-century

42 Buettner, Europe after Empire, 7.
43 Burton, Beyond the Imperial Turn.
44 On turns, see American Historical Review 117, no. 3 (June 2012).
45 Some non-Anglophone academics look askance at postcolonial studies, some on methodological grounds, some because they feel it threatens a kind of Anglophone takeover, others because they sense postcolonial studies is outdated and not worth taking up. Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul: Towards a Neerlandophone Postcolonial Studies, in: DiGeST (2014), 61–72.
46 Robert J. C. Young: Empire, Colony, Postcolony. Malden, MA 2015, 149.
empire, decolonization, and after.\(^{47}\) That this remains true is unfortunate considering that the strongest studies of colonial culture and history are often those melding cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and research into memory and history. The problem – from the historian’s viewpoint – is that too many investigations in the fields of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, or the so-called new imperial history are textual analyses so removed from historical significance as to lose much purchase for understanding of why and how things changed over time. I think of the joke about the French proclivity for theory: Someone proposes an effective business plan before the board of a multinational corporation, after which the board’s French member asks, “The idea works fine in practice, but does it work in theory?” Students of colonial culture and postcolonialism ought to be as attuned to how things worked out in practice as they did in theory. In a 2006 survey of literature on the British empire, Richard Price lamented that “the structure of argument to be found in some statements of the new imperial history is an untidy mix of broad conceptual claims jumbled with worthy political statements, intermixed with dismissive derision of those who practice ‘old’ or ‘reactionary’ imperial history.”\(^{48}\) I am not sure, ten years on now, how far we have gotten beyond this.

Of course, there are different ways one can measure the mutual influence between history and postcolonialism. Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, both of whom have influenced history writing, had personal roots in empire, suggesting a fundamental back-and-forth between empire, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and historiography. But taking a broader view suggests the mutual influence is not as great as it ought to be. From the vantage point of postcolonial studies, the practice of history remains stubbornly rooted in empiricism. Even if history is more art than science, historians still default to archival sources and other hard evidence of past realities, and many subscribe to objectivity as a fuzzy if unattainable guiding ideal. This has little hold in postcolonial studies, which relies more on close readings of texts, sometimes of dubious representativeness. From the viewpoint of the historiography of empire, Césaire, Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Robert Young and others have reshaped how historians think about the past but have had less effect on the practice of history. There are leading historians, some in the midst of highly successful careers, who surely must recognize the value of insights from Subaltern Studies, postcolonial studies, and so forth, but who do not go very far to incorporate them into new work. There are also historians who,

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\(^{47}\) Dane Kennedy: Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory, in: *JICH* 24, no. 3 (1996), 345–363.

for whatever reasons – generational, ideological, or otherwise – choose to take little from postcolonial studies.49

It is in any case necessary that when it comes to empire, decolonization, and society in the post-1945 era, that scholars prove what they are trying to show and demonstrate how culture had real-world effects and vice versa. This does not mean adhering to a strict empiricism. This is one of the great payoffs of White Man’s World, because Schwarz grapples with this issue like a master. Consider one minor but telling example, his discussion of one Australian’s sense of white solidarity. J. B. Jukes was a scientist aboard the HMS Fly sailing off Australia’s coast in the 1840s when he witnessed an Aborigine kill a fellow crew member. Jukes wrote that he “felt that the life of one of my own shipmates, whatever his rank might be, was far dearer to me than that of a wilderness of savages.” Was Jukes’s reaction representative? Schwarz admits Jukes might have been “unusually reflective”, but asserts that “there is no reason to think that the feelings he described were unique”, corroborating the latter assertion with evidence.50 Schwarz’s modesty and his candor regarding the tenuousness of certain conclusions coupled with his extensive research and close readings contributes to his argument’s persuasiveness that first empire and later memories of empire during the decolonization era shaped British conceptions of race and Britishness. Others, the present author included, would be wise to follow his example.

Another problem to overcome in analyses of culture and empire is the paradoxical lumping together of all “imperialists” or “whites”. Perhaps this results from the fact that much historians’ training in recent years has emphasized history from the ground up: social history, Alltagsgeschichte, Subaltern Studies and other approaches, all valorizing the voiceless and powerless. Some scholars go to great lengths to unearth the experiences of the subaltern, read against the grain, and undermine colonial-era generalizations and stereotypes – “the African” or “the Oriental” – including imagined (not to say unimportant) global racial hierarchies.51 But in this effort, a similar mistake is often made of lumping all Europeans together to create a reductionist picture. The classic critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism is that in breaking down monolithic European understandings and reproductions of “the Orient”, he generalized across diverse fields of study, people, nationalities, and perspectives to paint a homogeneous vision of European knowledge and its production. This paradoxical lumping together

49 Schwarz, Unsentimental Education.
50 Schwarz, Memories, 123–124.
The colonial past is never dead continues to occur. Take for example Terri Francis’s essay on “Josephine Baker’s Cinematic Celebrity” in Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic (2013), which at one point addresses ethnographic spectacles in cinema and music halls. Francis writes that “the European audience member had one way of looking at foreign peoples: as objects.” There is an irony when critiques of reductionist “Western” views of non-Europeans end up oversimplifying in turn regarding different peoples or points of view in Europe or the United States.

Avoiding simplified interpretations is a challenge when assessing the effects of migration, including post-colonial migration, on European societies. Buettner examines how immigration of formerly-colonized peoples reshaped Europe’s populations and societies. Consider the longstanding issue among Belges “de souche” or “oorspronkelijke” Belgen (“native” Belgians) regarding the country’s north-south divisions. The debate registers little with recent immigrants from North Africa or other formerly colonized lands, and since these now comprise a significant percentage of Belgium’s population, this changes the debate. Elsewhere Buettner makes the excellent point about how French of North African descent (second- and third-generation) accused of not assimilating insist they are integrated, because whatever you think of them, they are now part of France; they are not “outside” the country. Nonetheless Buettner’s analysis more often falls into the rut of examining views (French, Portuguese, Dutch, etc.) on the colonial past and postcolonial present as if migration had not altered the makeup of European populations and societies over time. One gets little sense of the views of French of Algerian descent – of whom there are millions – on colonialism, or those of Britons of West Indian descent regarding the end of empire. The number of Congolese in Belgium before 1960 approached zero, whereas today citizens and denizens of Congolese descent there number many thousands. Still, Buettner largely treats these people as if they were “outside” Belgian society somehow. The reader infers there was some fixed society – “Belgium” or “the Netherlands” or “Britain” – that reacted to things like immigrants in particular ways across decades as opposed to the society itself being in flux. Thus the strange point that in France, youths of North African descent were “viewed” or “feared” in certain ways. So French youths of Magrebi descent feared themselves? The frequent recourse to the passive voice often obscures who is doing the viewing, recalling, or believing.

Ongoing work also needs to incorporate smaller empires and colonization efforts that do not necessarily “fit” the prototype, namely the British and French empires, which have assumed archetypal status in a kind of riff on the Sonderweg thesis. Consider a lacuna in the scholarship on culture and empire: Spain. I still remember my historian’s delight when I found out Spain was the last remaining European state with territories on the African continent, namely the exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, bordering Morocco. This was sometime in summer 2002, coincidentally just before Spain sent troops to the unoccupied island of Perejil, which lies a mere 250 meters off the Mediterranean coast of Morocco, just south of Gibraltar. (Spain retook the island with force after Moroccan soldiers occupied it.) My wife is from Spain, and I discussed this with my Spanish family, sharing my surprise to learn that Spain still controlled not only the Isla de Perejil but also two small parts of Morocco. They quickly corrected me: Ceuta and Melilla were not part of Morocco, they were Spanish North Africa. That they bordered Morocco was incidental.

Although recent colonialism affected and continues to affect Spain, examinations of empire and Spanish culture almost always leave off at Spain’s 1898 losses and the “Generación de ‘98”, that anguished intellectual reawakening, evident mainly in literature, that followed the collapse of Spain’s once globe-spanning empire. Nevertheless 1898 was not the inevitable denouement of a crumbling imperialism. Josep Fradera has shown how Spain intensified its control over its remaining overseas possessions in the 1800s, for example making Cuba more profitable than ever. The 1939 Nationalist victory in Spain’s Civil War witnessed a rejuvenated imperialistic spirit. Even if this renewed impulse disintegrated as possibilities foreclosed when the tide of war turned against the Axis allies in 1942, Spain continued to rule overseas, ending its protectorate in Morocco only in 1956, fighting the Ifni War with Morocco (1957–58), granting Spanish Guinea (Equatorial Guinea) independence in 1968, and only in 1975 ceding authority over Spanish Sahara (Western Sahara). The Canary Islands remain an integral part of Spain, as do Ceuta and Melilla. One only has to look at the candy Conguitos, with its old-fashioned racist depiction of an African child on its packaging, or take in the disproportionate focus on Cuban or Latin American affairs on Spanish news to realize that the colonial past is not past.

When casting a broader net, how to incorporate Spain? How do you include Russia, Japan, or the U.S.? And what about other imperializing powers like Ethiopia, or British dominions South Africa and Australia? One method is that of *Echoes of Empire*: comparison via expansive collections of expert studies. Another is to include smaller empires via wide-ranging synthetic single-author analysis, a daunting prospect, as the (hopefully many) readers of Buettner’s *Europe after Empire* will realize. That said, the scholarship in this field has reached such proportions it is unreasonable to expect anyone to know all the literature in depth. Buettner’s ability to master the scholarship on “merely” five empires is astounding. Future work needs to move toward explicit transnational comparisons and analyses. Buettner insists “on the importance of Europe itself as an object of historical scholarship”, and criticizes other studies for “making few connections with parallel processes occurring elsewhere with decolonizing and postcolonial Europe.”

It might be more useful to think of imperial “webs” within and across which ideas and people exchanged and processes occurred, webs not necessarily centered on Europe. Occasionally Buettner does call the reader’s attention to such connections. It is fascinating to read how Charles de Gaulle considered Portugal when contemplating the future during the era of decolonization, worrying about France: “Va-t-elle se portugaliser?” She also points to how British ex-colonials might have found Portugal an attractive place to live because of “the Estado Novo’s stubborn hold on Africa”. But as noted, such moments in her book are rare, and there are innumerable cases of missed associations. Yes, the British believed they were the “best” colonial rulers. But so did the Belgians (because they were the most diligent), the French (bearers of a universal culture), and the Portuguese (because members of a unique pluricontinental entity with half a millennium of overseas history). What Buettner writes of post-World War II Dutch longings to hang on to their empire could also be said, mutatis mutandis, of the French Fourth Republic: “The return of peace brought with it a Dutch political system that produced a recalcitrant state policy pitted against decolonization or even compromise. [...] Dutch public opinion, although not unanimous, by and large endorsed the stance of political elites who prioritized maintaining the Indies and fighting the Republic [of Indonesia].”

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56 Buettner, *Europe after Empire*, 12, 13.
57 Ibid., 160.
58 Ibid., 228.
59 Ibid., 443.
60 Ibid., 90.
presided over by the Dutch crown”, so did Belgians toy with the idea of a Belgo-
Congolese federation joined by the monarchy.\textsuperscript{61} Killings in 1947–48 in India and
Pakistan confirmed diehard empire supporters in their belief that British colonial
rule was worthy.\textsuperscript{62} Although Belgian former colonials were perhaps more reticent
out of sheer embarrassment at the 1960–65 Congo Crisis, the trauma of Congo’s
independence and its consequences had similar effects, and Belgians’ views par-
alleled those of their British confrères. Not only former French colonials but also
Belgian returnees from the Congo looked back on the 1950s as a “golden age”.\textsuperscript{63}

Another direction for future scholarship is toward even greater openness to
the complexity of empire’s constellations and reactions to them. Many scholars
decry the inequality, racism, sexism, brute force, and authoritarianism that were
part and parcel of imperialism, and for good reason. If such views morph into
presuppositions about how history happened, there is the risk of prejudging
the colonized as victim or the colonizer as perpetrator rather than actors with
agency – albeit of differing degrees and kinds – hindering assessment of what
happened when, how, and why, the basics of history. Take for example studies
of “human zoos”, on the face of it obnoxious examples of the manipulation and
exploitation of “natives”. The 1958 Brussels World’s Fair’s Congo section included
an “African” village housing Congolese artisans behind fences. They eventually
pleaded to leave Brussels early because of abuse: Visitors asked to inspect their
teeth, or see the color of the palms of their hands; some threw food at them over
the fence. Yet Conal McCarthy, who has studied ethnographic displays of Māori in
colonial-era New Zealand museums and exhibitions, suggests a complex picture
of native participation in museum displays or exhibitions. Mixed-race Maggie
Papkura (Makereti), for one, took the initiative to organize troupes to perform in
parts of the British empire. McCarthy concludes that, “ethnographic exhibitions,
favourite targets of critical discourse analysis, reflect the messy process of their
production and reception, and uncover different responses from developers, par-
ticipants and visitors, despite the undoubted ethnocentrism of the day.”\textsuperscript{64} Colo-
nialist exhibits of non-Europeans and their cultures were not always, perhaps
never simple one-sided situations of domination. Being more unguarded in one’s
approach to the subject means being open to all forms of agency.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 456.
\textsuperscript{64} Conal McCarthy: Carving out a place in the better Britain of the South Pacific. Māori in New
The colonial past is never dead

We also ought to be more careful when it comes to investigating memory, culture, public commemoration, and empire and decolonization, including being clear what we mean when we use the word “memory”. As Roberta Pergher observes, the term,

functions at best as a rather imprecise and overworked metaphor for the processes of public communication through which the past is described, re-enacted, and refracted by people who often have no direct recollection of the events in question. It is questionable whether the social knowledge of the past can be adequately conveyed as “memory,” particularly when that knowledge is made up of a thousand different perceptions and judgments, which seem to go far beyond the act of recall.65

Once again White Man’s World can act as a guide even if – as at other moments in this essay – there is not enough space to do justice to Schwarz’s analysis. Among other things, he considers memory as it works in public and private; the interplay of recall and forgetting; the contributions of psychoanalysis to our understandings of memory; how memories are lost or reactivated; and how memories are able to form of things that we never experienced. All this provides a nuanced picture of memory’s functioning.

An additional subject deserving of more study is how imperialism not only reshaped Europe’s cultures in the post-1945 era but also its states, and not just empire and decolonization but the form of decolonization. Best known are the 1954–62 Algerian War’s effects. That conflict’s 1958 crisis led to de Gaulle’s accession to power, the Fourth Republic’s demise, and the creation of the Fifth. Not only did France adopt a new constitution, Algeria’s loss changed ideas about the Republic and citizenship, as Todd Shepard has shown. France had to “invent” decolonization, and it became a force, a “tide of History” – history with a capital H. For decades the French had been telling themselves Algeria was part of France, and absent History’s inevitability, they might not have accepted the unprecedented abandonment of extending liberté, égalité, fraternité to all parts of the republic.66 Calling out for more study is how the loss of the empire’s uniting force connects to the late-twentieth century devolution of power to Scotland and Wales in the U.K. and Welsh, Scottish, and English nationalism.67 Portugal’s 1974

66 Shepard, Invention, quote from p. 7. Shepard’s legalistic approach underplays how the French always knew Algerians were not “French”.
Carnation Revolution is another example of decolonization “coming home”. No one knew better than the military that Portugal’s long-running colonial wars were futile, leading to an army revolt against the Estado Novo. More than that, as Buettner shows, Portuguese identity shifted: the country was no longer lusotropical or pluricontinental, but rather European. To what extent did the loss of colonies shape republican Italy’s beginnings? Italians tend to view empire as “an excrescence of Fascist rule”, but expansionism overseas was part and parcel of the liberal state as it sought legitimacy from the late 1800s, and the Kingdom of Italy was involved in colonialism for some 61 (1882–1943) of its 85 years (1861–1946). There has been little coming to terms with the Italian colonial past, surely because problems of the fascist period overshadowed those of the colonial era, and because Italy faced no violent anti-colonial war of liberation, losing its colonies as it did to Britain during World War II.

Decolonization’s reshaping of state and society in post-1945 Belgium also merits further investigation. In my travels I have seen or heard many echoes of empire in that country, from colonial monuments that still dot the landscape, to a white man calling someone macaque in public, to the Matonge neighborhood in Brussels that is known for its Congolese character. But in ways empire and decolonization’s influences are more profound. Belgium’s colony prolonged the influence of the country’s francophone bourgeoisie and was a privileged field of action for the Catholic Church, a traditional pillar of society. Congo’s independence was followed by the beginning of the end of the unitary state in Belgium and the precipitous decline of the Church. The degree which these developments are interrelated remains largely uninvestigated, suggesting yet another path for researchers to follow.

68 Pergher, Italy’s colonial past, 329.