

## Silencing the ‘bristling Blimps’: Reflections on *Insurgent Empire*

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**Abstract:** Priya Gopal’s *Insurgent Empire* is an outstanding piece of anti-imperialist literature and a fine contribution to the field of ‘reparative history’. This essay suggests its brilliantly conceived underlying thesis about the ‘dialectical and dialogical’ relationship between ‘anti-colonial resistance and British dissent’ could be profitably applied further in three further directions. Firstly, the thesis could be applied to the *longue durée* of the British Empire, particularly from the sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century; secondly, Gopal’s method should be considered by scholars of other European empires, which would then facilitate further comparative studies with respect to metropolitan dissent and anti-colonial resistance; and thirdly the thesis could be placed in dialogue with labour and socialist history to examine more concretely the relationship between empire, race and class in British history.

**Keywords:** Imperial history, Reparative history, Anti-colonialism, labour history.

‘The gunboat. The bomb, the prison compound. That is what the monocle-flashing warriors of the Empah mean when they speak of determination. Will the sun never set on these bristling Blimps?’ So wrote the columnist and writer Keith Waterhouse in the *Daily Mirror* in 1955, in exasperation at the Colonel Blimps of his day, and disgust at what he called ‘the thick catalogue of shameful things that have happened in in Kenya in the name of the British Empire’ as reports of the torture, violence and terror being inflicted on ‘Mau Mau’ suspects and insurgents in what Caroline Elkins has called ‘Britain’s Gulag’ began to seep out (Gopal, 2019, 417). Waterhouse’s question – ‘will the sun never set on these bristling Blimps?’ – is cited by the literary scholar and courageous anti-imperialist ‘public intellectual’ Priya Gopal in her splendid and timely new work, *Insurgent Empire*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it seems likely it was essentially the kind of question which motivated Gopal to write what is perhaps destined to be her magnum opus in the first place after an encounter with Niall Ferguson, ‘the media face of the case for British imperialism’, on the BBC’s *Start the Week* in 2006 (Gopal, 2019, vii). As a riposte to the likes of Ferguson, *Insurgent Empire* is an outstanding piece of anti-imperialist literature, a superb ‘reparative’ narrative of race and resistance which builds on a rich but often marginalised body of scholarship in the field of imperial history, including popular works by Newsinger (2006) and Gott (2011).<sup>2</sup> It develops an argument that latter-day ‘bristling Blimps’ will find very difficult to rebut since it takes them far away from their natural fields of expertise. Indeed, Gopal’s work on ‘anti-colonial resistance and British dissent’ takes them to a place about which they know little, care for even less, and so prefer if at all possible to say next to nothing.

The underlying thesis, brilliantly conceived by Gopal, maintains that insurgent acts of anti-colonial resistance from the 1857 Uprising in India through to the ‘Mau Mau’ struggle

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<sup>1</sup> In the interests of full disclosure, it should be noted that I commented on a few chapters of Priya Gopal’s work in draft format, as mentioned in the acknowledgements, and she is very generous in her comments in the work about own work on C.L.R. James.

<sup>2</sup> On ‘reparative histories’, see Bergin and Rupprecht, 2018.

for 'Land and Freedom' a century later not only have to be placed front and central in how we think about the history of the British Empire, but that this resistance and the set of imperial crises they provoked also had a 'dialectical and dialogical relationship' to British dissent on the question of empire. As Gopal (2019, 29-29) writes, 'this study brings some of the tools of literary criticism – in particular, attention to voice, allusion, quotation, influence, intertextuality and translation' to 'a rich set of historical materials' to track 'the effect of anticolonial resistance from outside Europe and America on British dissident discourse'. In 'examining how their actions, their voices and their words were in fact assimilated and refracted in metropolitan oppositional discourse, we can re-vision colonial subjects as agents whose actual resistance put critical transformative pressure on British claims to cherishing freedom, and on those Britons who spoke and campaigned in its cause'.

The originality of Gopal's work then above all rests on this question of voice. The dialogical aspect of work, with its close readings and Bakhtinian focus on language and communication, is supported by an excellent selection of case studies drawing from a wide range of anti-colonial movements across a vast geographical canvas. Her tracing of processes of 'reverse tutelage' by various colonial subjects of British intellectuals ranging from Richard Congreve and Wilfred Blunt to Nancy Cunard, and from Frederic Harrison to Fenner Brockway, the resulting moral and intellectual transitions, often 'from sympathy to solidarity', and the emergence of 'a tradition of dissent on the question of empire' that helped inspire a 'reconfigured critical humanism and an expansive universalism' in the metropole are eloquently made, coherent, compelling and convincing (Gopal, 2019, 23). One example of the kind of dynamic process underway can be seen from the aftermath of the bloody repression of the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica in 1865. John Stuart Mill came to the fore as the chair of the Jamaica Committee, attempting to hold the colonial Governor Eyre to account. As Mill put it, 'If officers of the Government are to be allowed to take the lives of the Queen's subjects improperly ... without being called to a judicial account ... we are giving up altogether the principle of government by law, and resigning ourselves to arbitrary power' (Gopal, 2019, 124).<sup>3</sup> As Gopal (2019, 124-25) suggests, given 'the ways the voices of the oppressed and rebellious resonated in parliament through the Royal Commission's report', 'it is possible to read the more careful phrasing of John Stuart Mill ... as translations (with due elisions) of radical outrage into parliamentary discourse'. Indeed, Mill now 'expressed his support for black enfranchisement through suffrage in America' and 'his faith in colonial benevolence was no longer unquestioning', even now with respect to the role of the British in India (where as a former colonial administrator of the East India Company he had supported the repression of the 1857 uprising).

Gopal's approach and method could now be profitably applied in at least three further directions to build on the path blazed by *Insurgent Empire*. Firstly, the thesis might be 'tested' beyond the period of the 1850s to the 1950s to encompass the *longue durée* of the British Empire, particularly the earlier period before the mid-nineteenth century, and also parts of the empire which did not receive coverage (such as Ireland). Gopal (2019, 27) writes that 'it is now something of a commonplace that a certain kind of narcissistic humanism was exported to the colonies by the colonial project', and it would be interesting to think more

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<sup>3</sup> Mill's quote incidentally presages Michael Foucault's more famous remarks made over a century later about the how 'colonization ... had a considerable boomerang effect on the mechanisms of power in the West ... A whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West'. See Woodman, 2019.

about the ideological origins of the British Empire given it developed in part amidst a revolutionary upheaval against autocratic government – the English Civil War (see Calder, 1981). Indeed, ‘metropolitan anti-imperialism’ can perhaps first be seen during the English Civil War, when in 1649 some rank and file soldiers in the New Model Army under the influence of Leveller agitators rebelled against Cromwell’s plans to send the army to Ireland. (Carlin, 1987). Gopal’s central argument, that ‘the resistance of the colonized expanded the scope of humanism in the metropole’ (2019, 27) certainly can be made for the period before 1857, and indeed she does discuss the ‘abolitionist and feminist Elizabeth Heyrick’s magnificent 1824 polemic, *Immediate not Gradual Abolition*’ (Gopal, 2019, 25). More work though arguably still needs to be undertaken for example on tracing the impact of the Haitian Revolution and the late slave revolts in the Anglophone Caribbean on British dissent amid the ‘making of the English working class’ and the rise of the first mass movement of international solidarity in British history - the abolitionist movement (see Hochschild, 2005). Secondly, Gopal’s method should be considered by scholars of other European empires, building on the work by scholars of French anti-colonialism such as Michael Goebel (2015), which would then facilitate further comparative studies such as that by Elizabeth Buettner (2016) with respect to metropolitan dissent and anti-colonial resistance.

Gopal’s humanism shines throughout a work which gives us a set of wonderful stories relating to how the working-class anti-imperialist tradition in Britain ebbed and flowed from the 1850s to the 1950s, and providing fascinating pen-portraits of a host of figures who at various points help keep that tradition alive. Some are relatively well known figures, such as Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald, H.M. Hyndman, Sharpurji Saklatvala and George Padmore, while others are almost completely forgotten, such as Edward Beesly, Arthur Ballard and Catherine (Kay) Donnellan and Eleanor Francis (Frank) Cahill - the latter two Irish women who were interned during the Second World War for trying to organise workers in colonial Trinidad.<sup>4</sup> Yet – and this will be my final suggestion - her thesis could arguably be placed even more closely in dialogue with labour and socialist history than it already is, to examine even more concretely the relationship between empire, race and class in British history, and the relationships of international solidarity from below forged with British colonial subjects.<sup>5</sup>

In her epilogue, Gopal (2019, 450) cites the black Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James noting of the tenacious grip of colonial mythology on the British imagination, that ‘after so many generations of indoctrination and its apparent truth as a reflection of reality, it is now an organic part of the thought processes of the nation and to disgorge it requires a herculean effort’. Gopal’s work is an inspiring and powerful call to arms for a new generation of scholar-activists to commit themselves to this ‘decolonial’ struggle. Yet given this ‘herculean’ struggle can often feel akin to cleaning out the horse ‘muck of ages’ in the Augean Stables, it might be worth quoting one further point made by James (1977, 28): ‘The myth justifying and even ennobling “colonialism” or, as it used to be called, the “white man’s burden”...is not dead or dying’ but ‘is alive and will continue to be alive until another *positive doctrine* takes its place’.

For James, that new ‘positive doctrine’ was socialism, and while scholars such as David Featherstone (2012) and Satnam Virdee (2014) have done impressive work on

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Donnellan and Cahill, see Brereton, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the potential value of global labour history to challenge imperial revisionism, see Brandon and Sarkar, 2019.

questions of solidarity and race and class in modern British history, more work is needed to systematically track and trace the ‘dialectical and dialogical’ dynamic between working-class struggle in metropole and anti-imperialist revolt in the periphery. In Britain this sadly never came together in the powerful way it did during the French Revolution with respect to colonial Saint-Domingue, though the beginnings of a working class anti-racist tradition were first forged in the heady period of the 1790s thanks to black abolitionists in Britain like Olaudah Equiano and their relationship to London Corresponding Society. For a few weeks during 1831-32 the enslaved rose in Jamaica under the leadership of Sam Sharpe at a time when Britain itself was on the brink of revolution, but the Jamaicans were crushed before their struggle could become intertwined with the struggle being waged by British radicals. There was sadly no significant anti-colonial revolt amidst the decade of Chartism from 1838-48 when workers’ in Britain were on the march and built a mass movement, and Chartism itself had gone down to defeat by the time of the Indian uprising of 1857. However, as Gopal discusses, one powerful voice who attempted to construct solidarity based not just on moral sympathy but on a unity of material interests with that uprising in Britain came from the veteran Chartist leader Ernest Jones. ‘Suppose the spirit of the Sepoy host ... were infused into English Democracy ... where then would be class government?’, Jones asked, as he championed ‘the holy right of insurrection’, and dared to imagine the two struggles – that of the workers and that of colonial subjects fighting for liberation – coming together, for ‘the Asiatic East’ could be the harbinger of ‘the glorious contagion of successful revolution’(Gopal, 2019, 66-67). Only in the aftermath of such a ‘glorious revolutionary contagion’ against twenty-first century imperialism will the sun finally set once and for all on the ‘bristling Blimps’, but in the meantime Priya Gopal’s work is a welcome weapon in the fight against the apologists of empire-building in the here and now, and deserves to be very widely read and discussed.

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