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How to Cite: Reid, Darren. "Culture as Imperial Synapse: Pre- and Post-Foucauldian Approaches to Culture in British Imperial Historiography." *Le foucauldien* 5 no. 1 (2019): 4, 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.59>

Published: 20 June 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer-reviewed through the double-blind process of *Le foucauldien*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

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RESEARCH

Culture as Imperial Synapse: Pre- and Post-Foucauldian Approaches to Culture in British Imperial Historiography

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The study of British imperial culture is heavily attributed to the field of "new imperial history" that became defined in the 1990s, yet theories of imperial cultures date back to at least the 1950s. Furthermore, a recent cadre of new imperial historians has broken away from what might be called "new imperial history proper" to suggest a revised theory of imperial culture. This paper compares the theoretical influences and the methodologies of these three approaches, which I have termed the materialist approach, the discursive approach, and the localized approach, in order to show how pre-Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian imperial histories are not so diametrically opposed between materialism and culturalism as is commonly perceived. Instead, this paper argues that these three approaches all adopt a theory of imperial culture, each different and yet each with its own strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords: new imperial history; british imperial historiography; imperial culture; british empire

1. Culture in British Imperial Historiography, Before and After Foucault

What is an empire?¹ The simplest definition is of an aggregate of distinct territories ruled by a unitary government.² *How* is an empire? How is it created, and how is it maintained? These questions resist simple definitions. All that has been said definitively is that an empire is a network, a collection of territories connected by *something*. That the territories exist, that the network exists is not disputed. It is the nature of the *something* that connects the nodes of the network, which I call the imperial synapse, that is disputed. One of the most famous and long-lasting arguments in British imperial history, J.A. Hobson's 1902 *Imperialism: A Study*, suggested that the imperial synapse was economic interest, an argument that lives on in P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins' theory of "gentlemanly capitalism" published in the 1980s and 1990s.³ Of course, various alternative theories have been suggested in the 116 years since Hobson's work, and this paper is concerned with one of these alternatives: culture. Culture as imperial synapse is heavily attributed to the field of "new imperial history"⁴ that became defined in the 1990s, but theories of culture as imperial synapse date back to at least the 1950s. Furthermore, a recent cadre of new imperial historians has broken away from what might be called "new imperial history proper" to suggest a revised theory of culture as imperial synapse. This paper compares the theoretical influences and the methodologies of these three approaches to culture as imperial

¹ The scholarship in this paper which I refer to as "pre-Foucauldian" were not necessarily written before Michel Foucault began publishing his work. However, they were written before his more popular works *Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality* were written, and before Foucauldian influences began to appear in academic history. In this paper, "pre-Foucault" refers to the period before and around the publication of these three texts (1968–1978), and "post-Foucault" refers to the period after their publication.

² "Empire, n. and adj.," OED Online, Oxford University Press, accessed December 3, 2018.

³ See Peter J. Cain and Anthony G. Hopkins, "Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas I: The Old Colonial System, 1688–1850," *Economic History Review* 39, no. 4 (1986): 501–525; Cain and Hopkins, "Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas II: New Imperialism, 1850–1945," *Economic History Review* 40, no. 1 (1987): 1–26; Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (White Plains: Longman, 1993).

⁴ For discussions of the "new imperial history," see Stephen Howe, ed., *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010), and Kathleen Wilson, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

synapse, which I have termed the materialist approach, the discursive approach, and the localized approach. Such a comparison is necessitated by a common perception that political and economic historians of empire on the one hand, and postmodern and postcolonial historians of empire on the other, are diametrically opposed. David Armitage invoked this perspective in his review of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, stating that "Sir Keith Hancock, Sir Reginald Coupland, Ronald Robinson, and Jack Gallagher are the most frequently cited giants of imperial history. Almost as often, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said appear to be its most menacing nemeses."⁵ Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson again invoked this view when they wrote that "imperial historiographies, in particular, seem of late to have bifurcated into 'new' imperial histories that lay particular claim on the social and cultural terrain, and older histories that focus on the political, military, and economic."⁶ However, by focusing on how the materialist, discursive, and localized approaches treat culture in their understanding of the British empire, this paper suggests that the earlier political/economic histories and the later postmodern/postcolonial histories influenced by Michel Foucault and Edward Said are not so different as imagined: they all treat culture differently, yet they all nevertheless consider culture to be a pivotal aspect of our understandings of British imperialism. This paper shows that each of these three approaches utilizes a theory of culture as imperial synapse, that each approach's theory of culture has a different theoretical and methodological influence, and that each theory of culture has strengths and weaknesses that build upon and compliment the others'. The materialist approach exhibits a useful attention to the articulations of material power and culture, yet presents an underdeveloped theory of culture that is secondary to its theory of materiality. The discursive approach offers a much more sophisticated view of culture influenced by Foucault and Said, yet lacks attention to the articulation of culture with materiality. Together, the materialist and discursive approaches thus offer a nuanced understanding of the

⁵ David Armitage, review of *The Oxford History of the British Empire, vol. 5: Historiography*, by Robin Winks and William Roger Louis, *Economic History Review* 54, no. 1 (2001): 195–196.

⁶ Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson, *Empire and Globalization: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.

materiality and the cultures of empire, yet they give little attention to lived experiences and human agency. The localized approach's attention to conscious and direct change enables it to better account for the intentions, actions, and agency of individual people than the materialist and discursive approaches.

The first section of this paper identifies the materialist approach as rooted in Marxist historical materialism and Annalist structuralism, the second section identifies the discursive approach as rooted in Foucauldian discourse analysis, and the third section identifies the localized approach as a blend of social history⁷ and discourse analysis. Lastly, some brief concluding remarks follow. A note on the works covered in this paper. The purpose of this paper is not to provide an outline of the entire historiography of the British empire; many historians have done this before.⁸ Rather, I have found that, by taking such a wide perspective, historians have tended to emphasize differences to the detriment of attention to similarities, leading to the perception, mentioned above, that Foucauldian concepts of discourse and the "cultural turn"⁹ presented a complete divergence from earlier economic and political treatments of British imperialism. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to take a narrower perspective, and attend to how historians have treated culture in histories written before and after the cultural turn. My choice of which histories to include followed several criteria. First, I chose to focus on histories of *British* imperialism, rather than histories of imperialism in general, meaning many prominent scholars

⁷ I recognize that Foucault considered his discourse analysis to be a blend of social history and intellectual history. By social history, I mean a history that focuses on individual action and lived experiences, and I show in the second section of this paper how the discursive approach lacks this focus.

⁸ See, for instance, Amanda Behm, "Introduction: British Imperial History and Its Antecedents," in *Imperial History and the Global Politics of Exclusions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), 1–25; Durba Ghosh, "Another Set of Imperial Turns?" *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 772–793; Robin Winks and William Roger Louis, *The Oxford History of the British Empire, vol. 5: Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ Recognizing that may be said to have been various "cultural turns" in different academic disciplines, I refer to the cultural turn merely as a descriptor of the late-20th century movement in academic history that "came to replace scientific, positivist and economic explanations of the social world and initiated a fundamental reassessment of symbolization, language, representation and interpretation." Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 5.

in the study of imperial culture such as Frederick Cooper and Anne Laura Stoler fell outside of my scope.¹⁰ Second, I chose to focus on histories that take a transnational perspective, rather than histories that cover imperial themes from an area studies perspective. This further pushed many relevant works, such as Nicholas Dirks' study of the impact of imperial culture on sovereignty debates in India,¹¹ outside my scope. Finally, this paper aims to show multiple examples of how materialist, discursive, and localized approaches were applied to form different arguments. As such, I did not include works which adopted the same approach and made similar arguments. D.A. Lowe's 1973 *Lion Rampant: Essays in the Study of British Imperialism* is one such work that I did not include, despite its contemporary prominence, because its argument is very similar to John Galbraith's *Reluctant Empire: British Policy on the South African Frontier, 1834–1854*.

2. The Materialist Approach

Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's 1961 *Africa and the Victorians*, John Galbraith's 1963 *Reluctant Empire*, and Ronald Hyam and Ged Martin's 1975 *Reappraisals in British Imperial History* appeared at a point when the historiography of British imperialism was undergoing a radical reconceptualization. Hobson's previously dominant economic theory of British imperialism – that the empire was driven first and foremost by economic exploitation – was coming to be questioned, and Robinson and Gallagher, Galbraith, and Hyam and Martin each offered a new conceptualization of British imperialism to amend, if not replace, that of economic imperialism.¹² This section of the paper illustrates that these three works amended the economic imperialist concept by applying considerations of imperial culture, but that they by no means abandoned materialist explanations of empire entirely. Instead, they combined material and cultural considerations into what I term the

¹⁰ See, particularly, Frederick Cooper and Anne Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

¹¹ Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹² For an in-depth discussion of the state of imperial historiography at this time, see William Roger Louis, *Imperialism: The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976).

materialist approach. This section outlines the arguments of these works, explores their Annaliste structuralist and Marxist materialist influences, and explores the materialist methodology.

Robinson and Gallagher's main argument is that imperial activity was driven by metropolitan reactions to colonial crises, and, more importantly, that metropolitan reactions were determined by something they call the "official mind." The official mind refers to the combined experience and knowledge of hundreds of years of administration, through which perceptions of and reactions to colonial crises are filtered. "In the end it was the idea and the analysis of African situations in Whitehall, and not the realities in Africa as such which moved Victorian statesmen to act or not to act."¹³ To Robinson and Gallagher, the imperial synapse was culture in the sense that imperial activity was based on the skewed perceptions and representations of the official mind, rather than purely economic or political rationality. Galbraith makes a similar argument. He argues that metropolitan responses to colonial crises were determined by a tradition of humanitarianism based on obligations to honour and Christian morality. On the one hand, honour drove Whitehall to provide military protection to settlers. On the other hand, Christian morality drove Whitehall to intervene in Indigenous affairs in the pursuit of civilizing missions.¹⁴ Thus, Galbraith suggests that the imperial synapse was culture and not economy, because cultural ideas of honour and morality overrode economic and political rationality. On a different strain of thought, Hyam and Martin's main argument is that the metropole was able to maintain control over the empire through something called the "imperial factor," defined as the illusion of power rather than the exertion of power:

In crucial respects 'empire' was a myth, an illusion based on a gigantic confidence trick perpetrated by rulers and accepted by the ruled. If the post-independence regimes of today are ruled by black men with white masks, as

¹³ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: MacMillan Publishers, 1961), 21.

¹⁴ John Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire: British Policy on the South African Frontier, 1834–1854* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 8.

Fanon suggests, then the empire was even more certainly a system in which white men wore white masks, the masks of omniscience and infallibility.¹⁵

As such, it was the cultural assumption that settlers were backed by military and economic strength, and not the material exertion of military and economic strength, that kept the empire together.

These historians understandings of empire revolves around a synthesis of historically specific material circumstances and timeless cultural structures. Invoking a model of metropole-periphery that is characteristic of early-20th century British imperial history, these interplays always begin in the periphery with a colonial crisis. Robinson and Gallagher assert that "nearly all interventions appear to have been consequences, direct or indirect, of internal Egyptian or south African crises," referring to the collapse of the Khedival regime in Egypt and Afrikaner nationalist movements in the Transvaal.¹⁶ Galbraith, meanwhile, focuses on the Cape Colony frontier wars, and Hyam refers to a wide variety of crises including American border disputes in Canada and Maori aggressions in New Zealand.¹⁷ These crises are considered to arise from historically specific circumstances including such materialist concerns as Afrikaner land and labour shortages,¹⁸ the Khedive's massive debt to foreign investors,¹⁹ and settler insecurity amidst rampant cattle raiding in South Africa.²⁰ The material nature of these crises suggests the influence of Marxism on these historians, in the sense that their attention to land, money, and security follow Marx's assertion that the basis of all history is the production of the means to satisfy needs such as hunger and physical safety.²¹ However, the Marxist dialectic is a model for explaining how class struggles lead to constant social change, and these historians emphasis continuity over change.

¹⁵ Ronald Hyam and Ged Martin, *Reappraisals in British Imperial History* (London: MacMillan Publishers, 1975), 5.

¹⁶ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, 463–465.

¹⁷ Hyam and Martin, *Reappraisals in British Imperial History*, 7.

¹⁸ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, 53.

¹⁹ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, 80–81.

²⁰ Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire*, 41.

²¹ Karl Marx, "The Materialist Conception of History," in David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 165.

Invoking Annaliste structuralism, these historians explain how imperial cultural structures rendered the British empire ahistorical and timeless. For Robinson and Gallagher this is epitomized by the official mind, that unique historiography of imperial administration which ensured continuity and restricted change in the empire by dictating the range of possible responses to crises. "England's rulers had inherited not only a world empire but the experience gained in bringing it together, and the assumptions and prejudices accumulated from past successes and failures inevitably influenced their behavior."²² The official mind was based on an inheritance of timeless traditions, and the influence of the official mind on imperial activity rendered the empire itself effectively timeless. For Galbraith, continuity is ensured by humanitarianism, that compulsion of British administrators to adhere to cultural norms of honour and Christian morality regardless of contingencies such as economic or political interest. For Hyam, timelessness is conveyed through the imperial factor, the illusionary sense of power in which the empire only existed because subjects of the empire believed it existed. "The key to the problem [of maintaining control over the colonies], as with non-European peoples, was not simply power but the comforting illusion of power [...] While the white Dominions believed in British protection, they accepted their own subordinate status."²³ If the power of the empire existed in the belief of a powerful empire rather than the actual flexions of imperial power, then power is divorced from the historical moment and is rendered timeless. The way that these arguments divorce the operation of empire from historical moments and attribute it to inherited social phenomena reveals the influence of Annalist structuralism, in that they adhere to the Annaliste theory of the multiplicity of time. Braudel summed this up: "Nothing is more important, nothing comes closer to the crux of social reality than this living, intimate, infinitely repeated opposition between the *instant of time* and *that time which flows only slowly* [emphasis mine]".²⁴ In our case, the instances of time are colonial crises and the slowly flowing

²² Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, 21.

²³ Hyam and Martin, *Reappraisals in British Imperial History*, 7.

²⁴ Ferdinand Braudel, *On History*, trans. by Sara Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 26.

time is the official mind, humanitarianism, and the imperial factor. These historians are not by any means Annalists, for theirs are certainly histories of events rather than histories of the *longue durée*. Yet their event-focused histories are informed by an Annaliste conception of imperialism as an enduring structure. Thus, while I termed this approach 'materialist,' I must be clear that it does not follow a strictly Marxist historical materialist tradition, but rather illustrates a materialism that is amended by an attention to culture, a synthesis of local material crises and grand cultural structures.

As for the materialist methodology, these historians rely upon a comparison of imperial correspondence and colonial contextual records. The nature of this comparison is rooted in their deep distrust of imperial correspondence. Hyam laments that imperial administrators could never be trusted to understand the reality of the empire, because they "confused the illusion of empire with the fact of power."²⁵ Robinson and Gallagher argue that there was a disconnect between "the symbolism of their [imperial officials'] conscious calculations" and "the objective causes of which these are in some sense the image."²⁶ Galbraith explains his distrust of official correspondence:

Such evidence, of course, was valuable, but without archival research it presents a distorted impression of the character of imperial policy [...] Selections from a statesman's speeches or from his correspondence can exaggerate the contradictions inherent in the nature of the politician's profession.²⁷

To compensate for their distrust of correspondence, the materialist historians combine correspondence with contextual sources from the colonies under study, and thereby cement the dialectic between perceived reality conditioned by culture and actual material reality.

²⁵ Hyam and Martin, *Reappraisals in British Imperial History*, 17.

²⁶ Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, 25.

²⁷ Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire*, 1.

3. The Discursive Approach

Just as with the materialist histories covered above, Antoinette Burton's 1994 *Burdens of History*, Anne McClintock's 1995 *Imperial Leather*, and Catherine Hall's 2002 *Civilizing Subjects* appeared at a moment of radical change in British imperial historiography. Catherine Hall explains that up until the late 1970s,

it had been assumed that [...] the establishment of full self-government for those who had been colonized would mean a break with all that had gone before. By the late 1970s and 1980s, however, it had begun to be apparent that decolonization must tackle forms of representation as well as political and economic systems.²⁸

In an attempt to begin this work of decolonizing forms of representation, "new imperial historians" began incorporating Foucauldian and Saidian (Said himself was very influenced by Foucault) theories of culture, language, and discourse into their histories and moving away from earlier analyses of policy and economy. This section illustrates how these three works of Burton, McClintock, and Hall incorporated Foucauldian and Saidian theories into their approach to British imperial history, creating what I term the discursive approach. When I describe these approaches as discursive, I do not intend to give them a monopoly over discourse. After all, the materialist approaches mentioned above had discursive elements in the sense that humanitarianism and the official mind can be understood as discursive formations, and the localized approaches discussed in the next section certainly keep discourse in center view. What makes these approaches uniquely discursive is that they are about the indirect power inherent in discourses, about the representations that make up knowledge systems, and about "how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about,

²⁸ Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Reader* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 5.

practised and studied."²⁹ This section illustrates how their discursive approach represents a move away from materialism and an entrenchment within Foucauldian discourse analysis. But first, I will give brief summaries of their main arguments.

Burton's main argument is that British feminist discourse and British civilizing discourse influenced each other, so that the feminist movement was racialized through its articulations with civilizing discourse and imperial policies and activities were gendered through their articulations with feminist discourse. Burton makes arguments based on linguistic borrowances and rhetorical articulations. In the former, feminist discourse borrowed language from a civilizing discourse "steeped in racial metaphors and civilizing tropes,"³⁰ and thereby became racialized. In the latter, the uncivilized nature of Indian women "served as evidence of the need for British women's formal political participation in the imperial network."³¹ McClintock's main argument is that British imperialism happened first and foremost in people's imaginations and fantasies, and that the influences of imperial culture on the minds of Britons led to the creation of racialized and gendered power structures in the real world.³² By looking at popular cultural primary sources such as "photography, diaries, ethnographies, adventure novels, oral histories, performance poetry and the myriad forms of national culture,"³³ her implicit argument is that "imperial culture" is not limited to manifestations of culture that relate specifically to the empire, but that imperialism became embedded in all manifestations of culture. In other words, there is no such thing as "imperial culture," because there is no such thing as "non-imperial culture." Hall's main argument is that a two-way traffic of narratives constructed in Jamaica and transported to Britain, and of narratives constructed in Britain and transported to Jamaica, led to the relational differentiation between

²⁹ Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications in association with The Open University, 1997), 7.

³⁰ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 2.

³¹ Burton, *Burdens of History*, 10.

³² Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1–8.

³³ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 17.

Britishness and non-Britishness. By tracing representations of Jamaicans and Britons in both national discourses, particularly the writings of Edward Bean Underhill and Anthony Trollope in Jamaica and Thomas Carlyle and George Dawson in Britain, she shows how an imagined British identity as racially superior solidified in relation to the narratives constructed by missionaries in Jamaica.

I call these approaches discursive because their primary emphasis is Foucauldian discourse analysis. Foucauldian discourse analysis is based on Foucault's theory of knowledge systems, and so I'll briefly define Foucauldian discourse analysis before showing how Burton, McClintock, and Hall utilize and apply his theory to their histories of the British empire. Foucault theorized knowledge systems as made up of six levels of meaning: signs, statements, positivities, discourses, discursive formations, and epistemes.³⁴ Epistemes are historically specific totalities of knowledge systems, and the historical specificity of such knowledge systems are defined by the particular discursive formations that make up a particular episteme. Discourses themselves are made up of statements and signs, but "a discourse, unlike a sign or a statement, is not a material thing. It is a message which is embedded in the signs, and which arises from them as a group of statements."³⁵ As such, discourse analysis is not interested in materiality, but in the linguistic and institutional structures which organize, normalize, and are embedded within materiality. One of the most important aspects of discourses is that they cannot be approached with a simple cause-effect theory of historical change.

It [the archaeological method, or Foucault's method of discourse analysis] refuses to see in discourse the surface of the symbolic projection of events or processes that are situated elsewhere [...] It suspends such a casual analysis [...] in order to discover the domain of existence and functioning of a discursive practice.³⁶

³⁴ Callum Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (New York: Pearson Education, 2005), 60.

³⁵ Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians*, 61.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 164.

Rather than exploring direct cause-effect change, discourse analysis is concerned with exploring the indirect ways that discourses guide, limit, and construct change.

Burton exhibits perhaps the most explicit model of this type of approach. Identifying two discourses, civilizing and feminist, she explores how both worked complementarily to make up a discursive formation of imperialism, which itself then complimented discursive formations of class and gender to form a larger episteme of Britishness. "Like contemporary class and gender systems, imperialism was a framework out of which feminist ideologies operated and through which the women's movement articulated many of its assumptions."³⁷ Burton is not interested in tracing how specific events led to the British women's movement in a cause-effect relationship, but rather in tracing how various meanings within the discursive formations of class, gender, and imperialism indirectly informed the British women's movement. In a similar way, McClintock engages in discourse analysis to understand how the meanings within imperial discourses permeated through other discourses to create an essentially imperial episteme. For example, she traces the permeation of meanings from discourses of discovery and civilization into discourses of urban policy in London:

Drawing on the imperial progress narrative and the figure of the journey into the interior, journalists, social workers and novelists figured the East End slums in the language of empire and degeneration [...] The density, size and sprawl of the tangled slums were equated with jungles, and the language of imperial missionary enterprise was evoked to justify their penetration and their subjection to progress.³⁸

Much like Burton, McClintock uses discourse analysis to show how vocabulary and analogy facilitated the intermingling of different discourses. Similarly, Hall uses discourse analysis to trace how various humanitarian discourses (abolitionist, civilizing, etc.) interacted with discourses of gender and race to create new meanings of Britishness. Unlike Burton and McClintock, Hall retains a social history influence

³⁷ Burton, *Burdens of History*, 13.

³⁸ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 120–121.

in the way she locates manifestations of discourses in their local context by structuring her books along a series of case studies. *Civilizing Subjects* follows the stories of a selected cast of individuals, and presents the discourses they manifest as personal reactions to specific events. This is not to say that Burton and McClintock neglect to contextualize the discourses they study. The difference is that while Burton and McClintock use instances of individual actions to contextualize their discussion of discourses, Hall uses discourses to contextualize her discussion of individuals. She begins with individuals, and then uses discourses to show how individual actions were at once informed by transnational discourses and themselves informed those same transnational discourses. However, the social aspect of *Civilizing Subjects* is not to be overemphasised; as the subtitle *Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination* indicates, the focus of the book are the ideas and the meanings located in the discourses manifested by individuals, rather than the individuals themselves.

The discursive methodology fixates on representation, which reveals the methodological influence of Said. Said argued that in imperial writing,

The Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks.³⁹

He identifies representations of the Orient and Orientals as touchstones for identifying underlying discourses, and the discursive historians adopt the same method. Burton, for instance, revealed her attention to representation when she argued that images of "The Indian Woman" were represented by feminist periodicals that "normalized, domesticated, and brought Indian women 'home' to British feminist audiences in a way that naturalized empire and made colonial women seem like 'sisters under the skin.'⁴⁰ McClintock, in her examination of soap advertising campaigns

³⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 40.

⁴⁰ Burton, *Burdens of History*, 121.

in the 19th century, illustrated her attention to representation through showing how civilizing discourses were proliferated by "stamping images of colonial conquest on soap boxes, matchboxes, biscuit tins, whiskey bottles, tea tins, and chocolate bars."⁴¹ Hall showed her attention to representation in her reasoning for choosing to focus on the writings of certain missionaries:

Town dwellers encountered the empire in multiple ways: in their newspapers and their novels, in their museums and their lectures [...] But in those encounters and that cacophony of sounds, *some voices had more weight than others*. At key moments choices were made, for one view of 'the negro' rather than another, for one notion of empire rather than another. [emphasis mine]⁴²

Here, Hall is describing contests of representation in which, according to her, the individuals that make up her case studies gain representational authority. In recognizing relative representational authority, Hall references another influence of Said. Said wrote:

Unlike Michel Foucault [...] I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism [...] Foucault believes that in general the individual text or author counts for very little [...] I find this not to be so. Accordingly my analyses employ close textual readings whose goal is to reveal the dialectic between individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which his work is a contribution.⁴³

Said sees individual writers as having relative representational authority and so prioritizes certain individuals, and Hall uses the same method. The discursive methodology differs from the materialist methodology in that it does not weigh

⁴¹ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 209.

⁴² Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 289.

⁴³ Said, *Orientalism*, 24.

the validity of representations against material reality. Representations are taken as indicative of underlying knowledge systems, and so the extent to which such representations are materially inaccurate is irrelevant because knowledge systems don't have to be materially accurate.

4. The Localized Approach

Unlike the materialist and discursive histories discussed above, the histories discussed in this section do not represent a substantial departure from previous approaches to culture as imperial synapse. They more represent a branching-off from the discursive approach, adopting Foucauldian understandings of discourse and taking them in a different direction. Written just after the first discursive histories began to appear, they manifest a critique of imperial histories that laid "an overwhelming focus on the discourses of colonial power/knowledge, with little if any attention to the counter-discourses of the colonised or to anticolonial opposition in general."⁴⁴ Tony Ballantyne's 2002 *Orientalism and Race*, Alan Lester's 2002 "British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire," and Zoe Laidlaw's 2005 *Colonial Connections* each forward a theory of culture as imperial synapse that I term the localized approach. This section shows that while the localized approach retains an interest in discourse analysis, it emphasizes individual, direct, and conscious actions in which discourses become negotiated and hybridized in local imperial spaces, and this differentiates it from the discursive approach's attention to unconscious and indirect change. Before I explore the approach's theory and methodology, I will briefly summarize the arguments of these three historical works.

Lester's main argument is that, in reaction to a humanitarian discourse that vilified settlers, settler newspapers worked together as "partially-globalized circuits of communications" to "invent and popularize a new conception of trans-imperial Britishness."⁴⁵ Lester shows how three settler newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Graham's Town Journal*, and the *Nelson Examiner*, forged alliances with

⁴⁴ Stephen Howe, ed., *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010), 13–14.

⁴⁵ Alan Lester, "British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire," *History Workshop Journal* 54, no. 1 (2002): 44.

each other and with *The Times* in Britain, and used these alliances to coordinate a deliberate and conscious reaction to humanitarian criticism. Laidlaw's main argument is predicated on the "atmosphere of uncertainty" within which the Colonial Office operated due to the glacial speed of official communication before the laying of oceanic telegraphs in the second half of the 19th century. Given that imperial administration would have been nigh impossible when a round trip to the edge of the empire took almost a whole year, Laidlaw argues that personal networks of patronage, friendship, and acquaintance provided the bulk of the information that sustained the empire.⁴⁶ She argues that the "greatest historical significance" of such networks "lies in their role as mechanisms consciously utilised by their members."⁴⁷ Ballantyne's main argument is that the circulation of printed texts throughout the British empire ensured that the formation of identities in the colonies were multi-point rather than binary. "Indians' identities were not simply constructed through a generalized opposition between Indianness and Britishness."⁴⁸ Rather, the knowledge of other cultures that was transmitted to India was localized in the production of a multipointed Indian identity. Localization is one of his key concepts: "extracted from its Indian context and widely transmitted within the empire, Aryanism was localized in a variety of specific cultural locations as its meaning was constantly renegotiated in debates between a variety of British, settler, and Indigenous groups."⁴⁹

These historians work within a framework informed by discursive knowledge systems, but they employ a more social historical approach that pays attention to conscious action and lived experience. I conceive of the difference between the discursive approach and the localized approach in the context of Foucault's explanation of his understanding of change. "Through studying madness and psychiatry, crime and punishment, I have tried to show how we have *indirectly* constituted ourselves through the exclusion of some others: criminals, mad people, and so on [emphasis

⁴⁶ Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–1845: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 94.

⁴⁷ Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, 13.

⁴⁸ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 117.

⁴⁹ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 8.

mine]".⁵⁰ He places a focus on indirect change, and the approach of the discursive historians follow a more indirect approach, considering how discourses unconsciously influenced the development of identity. The localized historians, on the other hand, focus on direct change. Laidlaw explains that she is interested in the link between information and power, invoking Foucauldian power-knowledge, but her emphasis is on the intentional and conscious articulation of information by individuals. For example, she argues that "too often, the role of governor has been either ignored or sketchily caricatured, sometimes used to delineate eras, rather than to inspire an assessment of an individual's impact on a colony."⁵¹ As such, she contends that a comparison of official correspondence networks and unofficial correspondence networks reveals the lived experience of colonial governors, in that "unofficial correspondence with senior Colonial Office staff allowed governors to circumvent the constraints imposed by official communications."⁵² She remains concerned with discourse, giving attention to "not only their rationally held beliefs about governance ('mentalities'); but also their unstated, subconscious 'mores.'"⁵³ But her attention to conscious action indicates a social history influence similar to Natalie Zemon Davis'. Zemon Davis was interested in "the interplay between the socially determined and the chosen,"⁵⁴ and while the discursive approach is targeted towards only the socially determined, Laidlaw is interested in the interplay between the two. Lester explicitly locates his approach as between indirect discursive change and direct interactions with discourses. "Bourgeois ideas of legitimate behaviour towards others and corresponding notions of Britishness itself *moved through, and were contested within*, circuits connecting Britain with each of its colonies."⁵⁵ On the one hand, he recognizes that humanitarian discourse influenced notions of Britishness throughout the empire. On the other hand, he argues that settlers offered conscious repudiations of humanitarian discourse and fashioned their own notions of Britishness.

⁵⁰ Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 146.

⁵¹ Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, 62.

⁵² Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, 63–64.

⁵³ Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, 62.

⁵⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, "On the Lane," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988): 576.

⁵⁵ Lester, "British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire," 25.

If settlers were to resist being cast as aberrant Britons, or not Britons at all, then they had to invent and popularize a new conception of trans-imperial Britishness. I would argue that, by employing extensive, partially-globalized circuits of communication, this is precisely what they were able to do from the mid nineteenth century.⁵⁶

Lester presents a stronger emphasis on discourse than Laidlaw, and gives less attention to individual people's actions. However, he retains a similar argument that individuals consciously negotiated with different discourses by actively corresponding with newspapers, by editors selectively choosing which imperial newspapers to republish, and by journalists purposefully representing events in certain ways. Ballantyne also walks the line between indirect and direct change.

If we can understand [Aryanism] as a dialogic construct, the heavily intertextual product of competing voices speaking from a host of locations and subject positions, it is also important to recognize that *some groups within the empire resisted these discourses or posited counter-discourses of group origins and identity.*⁵⁷

His emphasis is on the localization of discourses, by which he means the ways local groups consciously interacted with and altered discourses. For example, he argues that despite missionary networks bringing print technology into Maori communities for the purpose of a civilizing mission, print came to be localized in subversive ways. New Maori language newspapers "became an important political forum for Maori,"⁵⁸ "expounded new models for social relationships between the Maori and Pakeha [white people],"⁵⁹ and "established (or contested) claims to lands and resources."⁶⁰ Ballantyne's emphasis on localization illustrates how he is less concerned on the indirect influence of discourses than on the direct interactions of individuals with discourses. These historians' attention to direct and conscious change reveals the

⁵⁶ Lester, "British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire," 44.

⁵⁷ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 146.

⁵⁸ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 156.

⁵⁹ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 156.

⁶⁰ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 156.

social historical influence of the localized approach, and distinguishes them from the discursive approach's Foucauldian emphasis on indirect and unconscious change.

The localized methodology of privileging circuits of information and the local and direct interactions with the information as it passes through such circuits reveals a Saidian methodological influence, albeit a different influence than that of the discursive approach. Ballantyne explains this influence:

To my mind, the central problem with the 'cultural turn' in imperial history has [been...] the inability of scholars to develop Said's insistence that Orientalism was a system of circulation. Rather than narrowly focusing on the rhetorical construction or ideological context of any given text, we need to begin to trace the transmission of ideas, ideologies and identities across space and time.⁶¹

His point is that historians who adopt the discursive approach (he specifically references Burton and several others) have "reinstantiated the nation as the seemingly natural unit of historical analysis" by confining their study of representations to fixed points in time and space.⁶² His response is to move from the study of representations to the study of localizations, of how certain ideas were interacted with different localities along lines of circulation. He did this by choosing one concept, Aryanism, and tracing the ways it was encountered at various localities of book publishing networks. Lester did this by choosing one concept, humanitarianism, and tracing the ways it was encountered at various localities of news print networks. Laidlaw's method is not exactly analogous, as she did not choose an ideological concept to trace. Instead, she chose a more abstract type of information that might be called "imperial situational awareness," and traced the ways that awarenesses of imperial situations became localized along parallel networks of official and unofficial communication. The localized methodology therefore differs from the discursive methodology in that it compares variations of representations along lines of circulation, rather than attending to representations as nationally bounded and unilaterally coherent. By unilaterally coherent, I mean that discourses are defined

⁶¹ Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 14–15.

⁶² Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, 2.

within individual spatial and temporal contexts (Britain, India, Jamaica, etc.) and the different localizations of discourses are not attended to.

5. Concluding Remarks

While this paper is organized chronologically in order to trace approaches to culture as imperial synapse in British imperial historiography from pre- to post-Foucault, it is by no means to be inferred that these approaches replaced or eliminated each other. Rather, all three existed and continue to exist together, and continue to develop in relation to each other. A great example of this is Christopher Bayly's 2004 *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons*, which falls within the materialist approach yet shows unmistakable signs of grappling with Foucauldian notions of discourse. Bayly, arguing that "physical domination was accompanied by different degrees of ideological dependence"⁶³ and that "industrious revolutions were not simply brute changes in the distribution of material forces [...] they were also revolutions in 'discourse,' to use today's jargon,"⁶⁴ readily accepts the concept of discourse to explain the cultural conditioning of material power. He does not, however, consider that power can exist outside of materiality. He critiques what he terms postcolonial and postmodernist historians for overemphasizing the roles of "people without power,"⁶⁵ and admits the importance of marginalized peoples only when they cross into materially powerful roles: "The marginal have always worked to construct the grand narratives as much as the converse is true [...] Nomads and tribal warriors became imperial generals. Barber-surgeons became scientists. Dancing women became queens."⁶⁶ By asserting that imperial power is rooted in materiality and dismissing Foucauldian notions of power-knowledge, he illustrates how a materialist approach continues into the present, informed by, but not directly influenced by, considerations of Foucauldian discourse theory.⁶⁷

⁶³ Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 3.

⁶⁴ Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, 6–7.

⁶⁵ Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, 8.

⁶⁶ Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, 8–9.

⁶⁷ John Darwin's *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) is another great example of this. Darwin argues that the strength

It is also not to be inferred that any one of these approaches is better or worse than the others. Each of the approaches outlined in this paper brings something valuable to the study of British imperial history, and it is better to consider them as complimentary than as competitive. This reflects Kathleen Wilson's assertion that new imperial history "is not out to substitute a new orthodoxy for an established one; neither is it calling for the evacuation of established political, social, or intellectual histories."⁶⁸ The materialist approach is well suited to capturing the articulation of material power and cultural influence. The materialist histories show no doubt that imperial power is material: it exists in military strength and financial capital. Yet they do not consider power to follow a logic of its own; military strength is not sent to where it is strategically needed, and financial capital is not invested according to the best economic reasoning. Instead, these sources of power are guided by culture, by the official mind or by humanitarianism. However, the materialist approach has an unsophisticated view of culture, treating it as both a timeless whitewash of local economic and strategic rationality and a unidirectional body of information that flows from the metropole to the periphery. Where the materialist approach is weak, the discursive is strong: the discursive approach's attention to the social construction of culture, and to the multidirectional interactions of discourses within knowledge systems, offers a much more sophisticated view of culture. In return, however, it lacks attention to the articulation of culture and material circumstances. Together, the dialectic and the discursive approaches give a comprehensive understanding of how culture operated as an imperial synapse. On the other hand, neither of these approaches give much attention to human agency. The materialist approach looks at how individuals bowed to the pressure of overwhelming cultural structures, and the discursive approach looks at how knowledge systems exert indirect influence.

of the British empire was founded upon the cumulative military and economic resources of all the British colonies, possessions, and spheres of influence, but that the transfer of these resources to Britain required the denizens of these colonies, possessions, and spheres of influence to culturally understand themselves as, to some degree, British subjects. Thus, while he acknowledges that imperial power was in many ways contingent upon cultural synapses, he considers power to ultimately lay in the military and economic resources themselves, and so reflects his materialist approach.

⁶⁸ Kathleen Wilson, *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.

Only the localized approach takes full stock of individual actions as constitutive of the world. Walter Johnson wrote that, in the context of studying slavery in the United States, "to speak of 'enslaved humanity' in this context is to try to imagine a history of slavery which sees the lives of enslaved people as powerfully conditioned by, though not reducible to, their slavery."⁶⁹ The localized approach carries this notion to imperial history. By focusing on the ways individuals "resisted these discourses or posited counter-discourses," localized historians imagine a history of colonialism which sees the lives of the colonized and the colonizers as powerfully conditioned by, though not reducible to, imperial culture. That these approaches all contain a theory of culture as imperial synapse serves as a corrective to the common perception that pre- and post-Foucauldian histories of British imperialism are evenly split along material and cultural lines.

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⁶⁹ Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 115.

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How to cite this article: Reid, Darren. "Culture as Imperial Synapse: Pre- and Post-Foucauldian Approaches to Culture in British Imperial Historiography." *Le foucauldien* 5, no. 1 (2019): 4, 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.59>

Submitted: 17 February 2019 **Accepted:** 29 May 2019 **Published:** 20 June 2019

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