

Gopal, Priyamvada: *Insurgent Empire. Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. London: Verso 2019. ISBN: 9781784784126; XIII, 607 S.

Rezension von: Harald Fischer-Tiné, Lehrstuhl für die Geschichte der Modernen Welt, Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich

It is not only the debates around Brexit and the related talk of establishing „Empire 2.0“ that have stimulated a renewed interest in imperial history in the United Kingdom. Since the late 1990s, there has been a vivid controversy on the history of the British Empire and the history of decolonisation, triggering the publication of a copious number of monographs, edited volumes and entire book series. One of the commercially most successful early contributions to the discussion on the „balance sheet“ of British imperial rule was Niall Ferguson's *Empire. The rise and demise of the British world order and the lessons for global power* published in 2002.¹ Setting the tone for a number of similar publications that would follow suit, the Harvard historian presented the British imperial expansion as an ultimately beneficent process and the Empire as a gigantic development agency of sorts, whose „anglobalization“ policy prepared the ground for the boom of Asian and African economies in the 21st century. As Priyamvada Gopal, a reader in „Anglophone and related literature“ at Cambridge, reveals in the first pages of the book under review, it was a heated debate with Ferguson on a BBC radio show back in 2006 that inspired her to write *Insurgent Empire*. It took Gopal no less than thirteen years to finish the full written reply to Ferguson et al. and dismantle what she perceives as phony empire „mythology“ (p. VII). The result is impressive, not least in quantitative terms: the fact that her book has more than 620 pages and 2.000 footnotes leaves no doubt that the Cambridge lecturer really meant business when picking up the gauntlet thrown by contemporary advocates of empire nostalgia.

In the main, *Insurgent Empire* advances three arguments: For one, decolonisation and the end of empire was not the result of a carefully planned „transfer of power“ after

the fulfilment of an imperial civilising mission, but the result of protracted resistance and „hard-fought struggles“ by the colonised at home as well as in the diaspora (p. 4). Second, the shockwaves sent out by these violent acts of resistance, the reports of „politically inclined“ metropolitan travellers, who returned from fact-finding missions in British colonies, together with the „reverse tutelage“ provided by anticolonial activists from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean resident in the United Kingdom decisively influenced the articulation of imperial criticism and concepts of freedom in Britain itself (pp. 8f.; pp. 24–27). Finally, this critique of imperial oppression was often undergirded by leftist ideas and went in tandem with a critique of capitalist exploitation, especially in the twentieth century.

At first sight, none of these points appears to be earthshakingly original. There has been no dearth of recent attempts to provide portrayals of the British imperialism as a story of „resistance, repression and revolt“², and there is by now also a growing body on literature about diasporic anticolonialists and their „politics of friendship“ with Western radicals.³ The unique character of Gopal's book lies rather in its ambition to bring these threads together and provide a truly „grand synthetic counter-narrative“ (p. 12) of protest and resistance that covers an entire century (1850s to 1950s) and has a strong focus on what is – somewhat nebulously – termed „black agency“ (p. 17). This is what *Insurgent Empire* is all about.

The book is subdivided in two parts. The slightly shorter Part I (pp. 41–206) contains

¹ Niall Ferguson, *Empire. The rise and demise of the British world order and the lessons for global power*, London 2002.

² See Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire. Resistance, Repression and Revolt*, London u.a. 2011; John Newsinger, *The Blood Never Dried. A People's History of the British Empire*, London 2013; and Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire. Challenges to Modern British Imperialism*, Oxford 2015.

³ See, for instance, Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920. Resistance in Interaction*, Oxford 2002; Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities. Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, (Politics, History, and Culture), Durham, NC 2006; and Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia. How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*, Berkeley 2011.

four chapters dealing with „crises and connections“ in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. It starts with a chapter on the reception of news about the Great Indian Rebellion of 1857–59 in the imperial metropole. Priyamvada Gopal singles out the positivist Richard Congreve (1818–1899) and the Chartist Ernest C. Jones (1819–1869) as prime examples of political commentators who were challenged by Indian resistance to reflect on the moral legitimacy of Britain’s imperial enterprise at large. The subsequent chapter moves on similarly well-charted terrain. The Morant Bay Rebellion that shook Jamaica in 1865 and the subsequent controversy around Governor Eyre have long been popular topics among scholars interested in the history of ideas, not least because the public debate involved the cream of English public intellectuals and literati of the mid-Victorian age, such as Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill. Gopal, however, is more interested in the support of British working class organisations for the anti-Eyre lobby. According to her, it marks the beginning of „self-conscious identification of the causes of black and white people against the depredations of the ruling classes“ (p. 124). While this provides an interesting interpretation of a familiar phenomenon, it would nonetheless have been worthwhile to contextualise the debate revolving around the Jamaican rebellion more thoroughly with the simultaneous discussions on the Civil War and black enfranchisement in the United States. With chapter 3, the author leaves the beaten track of the „great rebellions“ and moves to a comparatively lesser known episode: the outspoken criticism levelled by the slightly eccentric ex-diplomat, orientalist and political commentator Wilfrid Blunt (1840–1922) against Britain’s occupation of Egypt in 1882. The last chapter in this section zooms in on Labour Party politicians who travelled to India in the decade preceding World War One and became engaged in intensive exchanges with Indian nationalist interlocutors in order to find out whether the recent „Indian unrest“ was driven by legitimate grievances.

The book’s second part (pp. 207–441), entitled „Agitations and Alliances“, jumps from the early 1900s straight to the interwar period, by which time London had become a

global hub for anti-imperial agitation. Some of its six chapters focus on individual figures, such as the Indo-British leftist Sapurji Saklatvala (1874–1936), who was an Member of Parliament for the Labour Party in the House of Commons for seven years and the Trinidadian communist turned pan-Africanist George Padmore (1903–1959), who used the capital of the British Empire as the operational base for his anti-imperial networking from the mid-1930s onwards. Other chapters closely examine organisations such as the British section of the League against Imperialism (pp. 261–278) or reconstruct metropolitan protest campaigns. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia or the human rights violations resorted to during the brutal suppression of the Mau Mau insurgency by the British colonial authorities in Kenya during the early 1950s are intriguing examples of such movements. In what is arguably the most original and convincing chapter of this section, indeed, of the entire book (Chapter 7, pp. 279–318), Gopal sheds light on the intersections of anti-colonialism with feminist agendas by exploring the collaboration of Harlem Renaissance poet and „negro socialist“ Claude McKay (1889–1948) with the English „rebel heiress“ Nancy Cunard (1896–1965) and veteran suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960). Whereas in other sections of the book, one can discern a slight tendency to paint too rosy a picture of cross-racial anti-imperial alliances between anti-colonial agitators and British leftist politicians and intellectuals, Gopal manages in this particular case study to provide an admirably nuanced depiction of the power asymmetries that often characterised even such „progressive“ coalitions.

In sum, though not everything is new or surprising for scholars familiar with the field, the many vignettes that Priyamvada Gopal weaves together into a comprehensive narrative nonetheless provide fascinating insights into the trajectories of anti-imperialism in Britain and the interactions between Afro-Asian and British critics of empire. That being said, it cannot be denied that the second part of the book strikes this reviewer as more convincing than the first, where Gopal moves on fairly well-trodden paths and largely draws

on works of secondary literature that have already carefully analysed imperial sceptics on the British Isles.⁴ It is also regrettable that the author scarcely deals with the colourful diaspora of African, Asian and Middle Eastern political activists that had assembled in London in the decade before the Great War. A more in-depth analysis of characters such as the Indian „revolutionary“ Shyamji Krishnavarma, who, in his writings, constantly referred to the early British critics of imperialism discussed by Gopal in the first four chapters of her book, would have provided a strong tie to bind together the otherwise somewhat disjunctive two parts of her book.

There are other problematic absences. Gopal hardly refers to the Irish freedom struggle, although the connections between anti-colonialism and Irish republicanism and Fenianism were extraordinarily strong, especially in the two decades before the end of World War I. It also seems a bit dicey to provide an account of the genesis of anti-imperial discourses in the United Kingdom without mentioning the debate revolving around the second Boer War (1899–1902). However, to be fair, one has to acknowledge that such minor shortcomings are largely a result of the magnitude of the task Priyamvada Gopal has set herself: the sheer breadth of the topic and the long period under survey leave few choices other than adopting a somewhat eclectic approach. This seems to be the price one has to pay in order to write a politically meaningful „grand synthetic counter-narrative“ – an exercise in which the author has largely succeeded. Part of this success is due to the fact that Priyamvada Gopal writes in a lively and very elegant style, making *Insurgent Empire* a pleasant reading in spite of its length and the density of information it contains. At times, the tone may be a bit polemic, and the fact that Gopal has an axe to grind by attacking Ferguson and other conservative „Empire mythologists“ becomes plainly obvious. However, this must not necessarily be a bad thing. In a time when right-wing academics like Bruce Gilley continue to get a lot of media attention when making their revisionist „case for colonialism“, it is essential to send out clear messages. One can only hope, therefore, that a book that effectively debunks the myths un-

dergirding such neo-imperial revisionism will find many readers both inside and outside of academia.

Harald Fischer-Tiné über Gopal, Priyamvada: *Insurgent Empire. Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. London 2019, in: H-Soz-Kult 11.05.2020.

⁴ See, most importantly, Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics. British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920*, New York 2010. While Gopal frequently cites Claeys, she seems to be unaware of another important work: Benedikt Stuchtey, *Die Europäische Expansion und ihre Feinde. Kolonialismuskritik vom 18. bis in das 20. Jahrhundert*, München 2010.