

Robert J.C. Young

What was the German empire?

review of

Russell A. Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NE, 1998.

(1999)

Russell A. Berman is certainly right in his observation that much postcolonial analysis of imperialism in English has concentrated on the history of the British Empire, and that German imperialism has received comparatively little attention. Within Germany, however, one would want to argue with Berman that there have been some very impressive analyses: Jürgen Osterhammel's brilliant *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (1995), Helmuth Stoecker's very useful *German Imperialism in Africa* (1977), to say nothing of Wolfgang Reinhard's definitive *Geschichte der europäischen Expansion* (1983-90), the best account of European colonialism in any language. Notwithstanding these, in the postcolonial context of the Anglophone world, Germany ranks in terms of neglect with Spanish or Portuguese imperialism, or Dutch, Belgian, Italian, Turkish, Russian, Japanese or even American imperialism: only the French get anything like comparable attention to the British. There is certainly a lot of colonial and imperial history out there, particularly when broadened to include the cultural formations of

both colonisers and colonised.

German imperialism is distinguished by its extraordinarily brief life span. If we set aside the role played by Prussia in the Western subjugation of China from the 1850s onwards, German imperialism began with the occupation of Alsace-Lorraine and the foundation the German nation itself after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, and, as far as the world outside Europe was concerned, ended with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, less than fifty years later. Even within that period, Bismarck was initially opposed to the establishment of German colonies, no doubt as a result both of his belief in free trade and of the fact it was the Germans, starting with Herder, who had most fully developed the ideology of the nation state as an integrated whole, with an authentic identity which distant colonial possessions would always dilute or endanger. German imperialism was for the most part focussed on Africa as a result of its substantial commercial interests in the continent. Having benefited enormously from the British policy of free trade, by the 1880s a new wave of protectionism convinced Bismarck that without African colonies, Germany would end up without any means of access for direct trade with Africa at all. The new imperial interest in Africa by the new European power led to the partition of the continent at the Congress of Berlin of 1884-5. Germany was to end up with Togo, Kamerun (Cameroon), German South West Africa (Namibia), and German East Africa (Tanganyika, now Tanzania). In terms of imperial activities, there was also some serious intrigue in Morocco, the Middle East (the Berlin-Baghdad railway), and an extension of earlier commercial interests in Latin America and the Pacific.

After 1919, Germany was stripped of its colonial

territories, but the story did not end there. Analysts such as Aimé Césaire pointed out long ago that fascism in many ways simply involved bringing the practices and racist ideologies of colonialism home to Europe: not only were concentration camps inspired by colonial practices in Southern Africa, even the Holocaust was given a first-run with the *Vernichtungskrieg* ('War of Destruction'), or genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples of German South-West Africa in 1904-1907. Hitler's Third German Empire was in practice largely European in the orientation of its expansion—even the Russian invasion never got further than the borders of Eurasia. At the same time, however, Nazi Germany also revived the policies of its imperial predecessor. Before the Second War broke out, Hitler made increasingly vocal demands for the return of the German mandated territories; this was not simply strategic, for the upper echelons of the Nazi party, in collaboration with the Deutsche and Dresdner Banks, also engaged in meticulous planning for the future annexation of virtually all of tropical Africa whose resources, and peoples according to Nazi racial theory, were to be exploited for the benefit of the fatherland. As is well known, the French colony of Madagascar was also chosen in the original 'final solution' as the site for the deportation of the Jews to a Jewish state that would be run under Nazi supervision.

During the hey-day of imperialism, analysts used to like to contrast the different colonial systems, generally in order to argue for the superiority of their own, but usually with some admiring glances at their rivals. Berman follows this practice, placing his account of German colonialism in a comparative national framework. What, therefore, aside from its brief history, was specific to German imperialism? An historical

answer might be its combination of exploitative commercialism with a racialism unabashed by what Ernst von Weber characterised as the 'soft' policies of the British, caught up in their ideology of liberalism. According to Berman, however, 'the key question', in any analysis of German colonial discourse, 'is one of space, not race'. Drawing on the influential work of the best account of German imperial discourse and ideology, John Noyes' *Colonial Space: Spatiality in the Discourse of German South West Africa 1884-1915* (1992), Berman examines a number of writers, both German and 'Greater' Germans such as Freud and Kafka whom Berman brings into the Germanic cultural living-space, in relation to texts concerned with travel and other forms of the construction of what is problematically called a 'mulatto geography'. On their own, as individual essays, these analyses offer very interesting interpretations of particular textual configurations, particularly of the later writers Freud and Kafka (whose incorporation into imperial Germanic culture many today would want to question): I am seriously grateful to Berman for his insights into something that has for long puzzled me—Freud's curious fantasies about Hannibal and Bismarck. The larger claims and basic comparative framework of the book are, however, less satisfactory. Berman's predominant focus is on 'how German travelers in the non-European world ... encountered alterity and came to grips with it (or not)'. This genuine encounter with the other, rather than its Orientalist stereotyped representation, he suggests, is what distinguished German colonial discourse from the British or French. Could this really be altogether so neatly so?

It soon becomes clear that Berman is referring not so much to the comparable historical texts, as to

contemporary postcolonial theory, which forms the subject of much of the discussion of the introduction and final chapter. It turns out, however, that this aspect of the book represents not a sally not into postcolonial theory as such, as into the continuing academic war between the rival empires of French and German philosophy and theory (Habermas vs Derrida, etc., though without reference to the main debates or recent rapprochements). Berman attacks contemporary postcolonial theory on the grounds that it is against the Enlightenment, claiming that 'much of contemporary criticism' equates 'the Enlightenment's legacy of reason and science with the systems of domination for which reason might be taken to stand.... Enlightenment thereby becomes just another name for Empire'. However, this equation of Enlightenment and empire seems to be largely his own: he produces not a single reference or citation to substantiate this generalisation. The widespread use of Adorno by Said and others is not mentioned. Even when he discusses Derrida, whose work and influence is clearly the target of much of his criticism, directly in the final chapter he cites only a single essay on apartheid and moves, after less than two pages, to concentrate on Sartre's Preface to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* of 1961 — a text which was not even historically postcolonial in relation to the Algeria on which it was focussed. The book therefore opens by setting up a straw target, summarising an argument that Berman claims represents postcolonial deconstructive criticism, but which seems if anything to be taken more from the debates about modernism and postmodernism initiated by Lyotard (who is never mentioned). Having equated post-colonialism with postmodernism, and conflated both with Sartre, in order to equate empire and enlightenment,

Berman concludes that 'Deconstructive antilogocentrism is therefore a fraudulent basis for a critique of empire, and imperialism is simply not an essential or necessary feature of Enlightenment'. The straw man of 'antilogocentrism' has therefore been puffed down.

The other side of this set up is a reductive strategy, in which Berman sometimes characterises his enemy by the very reverse of their own position, and then claims their arguments as his own. Take the following: 'Where Sartre and Derrida operated with neat distinctions between colonizer and colonized ... the German material—Sacher-Masoch, Nolde, and Kafka—displays a more complex and transgressive relation between the poles of the colonial dialectic'. To assert one's material to be more complex than a Derrida whose distinctions are too neat is at the very least a bold move, even when it is that of a Kafka who is (here) German (Berman does not mention Derrida's analyses of Kafka). Exactly where, though, does simplistic Derrida ever make these alleged 'neat distinctions between colonizer and colonized'? We are never told (nor could we be). Or take this: '... by understanding how the exoticization of the non-Western world is a consequence of historical forces, we can see how the postmodern celebration of the other—the mythic, the primitive, the non-Western—is deeply implicated in a system of global segregation'. Setting aside the conflation of the postmodern and the postcolonial here, the exoticisation of 'the other' is the very thing that postcolonial criticism above all has subjected to stringent and effective critique.

Or, final example, take the paragraph which begins with the suggestion that, despite the reservations about deconstructive criticism expressed above, the ideas of hybridity and transculturation of Homi K. Bhabha and

Berman's colleague at Stanford, Mary Louise Pratt, have been a strong influence on his work. Berman then goes on, perhaps not surprisingly, to express his reservations about even these two writers, and stakes out the difference of the German from the British and Latin American material. In the work of both critics, he argues:

General statements about Europe are made on the basis of particular national events. The underlying assumption of post-colonial theory appears to be that British imperialism is the normative imperial structure. The point of this book, on the other hand, is to argue that the German experience was quite different, displaying alternative possibilities within the Enlightenment and, more importantly, quite different notions to alterity. The less stable and more permeable notion of 'German', which allows one to include Freud and Kafka in this discussion, results in a greater permeability towards other cultures. The potential for hybridization is consequently not primarily postcolonial but immanent to the colonial situation itself, at least where the colonizing nation has the requisite flexibility of identity. In the German case, however, the understanding of empire requires a deep revision. Although it can entail aspects of violent domination, it also allows for transgression, mixing and plurality. To represent the colonial scene solely as a Manichaeian separation may be an adequate description of British imperialism, but as a general account it is a sorry misrepresentation and ultimately simply a political effect of a politicized anti-colonialism, polemically distorting the scope of differentiation.

The Anglophone representation of imperialism here begins as hybridity but ends as a Manichaeian separation, so that German imperialism can be 'quite different' in

allowing for 'transgression, mixing and plurality'. In arguing that hybridity was 'not primarily postcolonial but immanent to the colonial situation itself', Berman passes over the fact that Bhabha's theory of hybridity was developed precisely to describe the 'colonial situation' of British imperialism in nineteenth-century India. In showing 'how German travelers in the non-European world ... encountered alterity and came to grips with it (or not)', in arguing for possible 'fruitful border crossings' and in chastising contemporary criticism for failing 'to imagine the alterity that is at the core (not the margins) of colonial discourse: the possibility of exploring the world and experiencing something new', Berman is hardly convincing in his main thesis that German colonial discourse is very different from any other.

In one respect, however, he does show that he is a long way from the central argument of Bhabha's theory of hybridity, namely that hybridity involves a cultural crossing that does much more than just inflect European culture with the sympathetic experience of alterity. The translations of hybridity are significant, Bhabha suggests, because they reverse the subject positions and above all the power structure between the antagonistic actors in the colonial scene. The German empire, we are told, was different because it was 'organized around tropes of empathy with the colonized'. In Berman's account, it is always the German traveller or explorer alone who 'comes to grips (or not)' with alterity—a metaphor that significantly echoes the grasping process of imperial appropriation itself. To this extent, the basic colonial perspective of his writers is never threatened, disoriented, reversed or resisted, by a switch into the subject position or experience of the surviving Africans who

escaped extermination and so generously provided all that alterity.

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