

Revealing the Colonial in Common Sense – Then and Now

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Abstract:

In *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times* Ann Stoler offers a collection of essays contributing to the concept-work on the enduring and shapeshifting relations of a colonial past in the political present. With a grand geographical span and a wide topical scope, Stoler's focus is on how academic and political conceptualizations of colonial history control the parameters with which we understand the world today and how, as a result, imperial structures and relations change. In her analysis, she offers new tools to make "colonial entrails" (p. 4) visible, guided by three main interests: 1) How concepts produce, reflect and maintain inequity 2) The difficulties of writing colonial histories that are entangled in the geo-political present and 3) "Unlearning" about colonial governance and critically engaging with misunderstandings. *Duress* provides the reader with methodological devices to clarify imperial relations in addition to original historical and political analysis.

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Stoler, Ann Laura: *Duress. Imperial Durabilities in our Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 448 pages, 28.95 USD. ISBN: 9780822362678.

Abstract:

In *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times* Ann Stoler offers a collection of essays contributing to the concept-work on the enduring and shapeshifting relations of a colonial past in the political present. With a grand geographical span and a wide topical scope, Stoler's focus is on how academic and political conceptualizations of colonial history control the parameters with which we understand the world today and how, as a result, imperial structures and relations change. In her analysis, she offers new tools to make "colonial entrails" (p. 4) visible, guided by three main interests: 1) How concepts produce, reflect and maintain inequity 2) The difficulties of writing colonial histories that are entangled in the geo-political present and 3) "Unlearning" about colonial governance and critically engaging with misunderstandings. *Duress* provides the reader with methodological devices to clarify imperial relations in addition to original historical and political analysis.

Imperialism endures when it is considered historical, cornered into a finished past, rather than relating to the world today. Ann Laura Stoler argues that colonial timelines must be bent and stretched such that imperial formations are unearthed from the epistemological and political trenches that occlude them. In an anthology divided into three parts, she equips the reader with concepts to do so. Stoler's intervention is explicitly motivated by the ways in which imperial misunderstandings perpetuate or conceal pressing issues of the world today such as ecological catastrophes or humanitarian failures. Written for her peers across academia, Stoler invites her readers to look carefully at and then beyond the categories and concepts that have misrepresented imperialism with the implicit aim of reckoning.

The book's first part groups four essays that each speak differently to the ways in which conceptual framing relates both to how the colonial past is remembered and how the imperial present is explained. The first chapter outlines the justification for this project by arguing that the most urgent social,

ecological, and political issues facing the world today are “steeped in the colonial histories of which they have been, and ... continue to be a part” (p. 3). Stoler begins to illustrate what she means by this in the following three chapters. The second chapter provides a discussion on the absence of Israel and Palestine in the field of (post)colonial studies by tracing the reception of Edward Said’s *The Question of Palestine* in comparison to *Orientalism*. The third deconstructs the ‘common-sense’ understanding of colonialism via a genealogical and comparative analysis between agricultural and penal colonies in Australia and Algeria. Finally, the fourth chapter examines the silences surrounding empire in French academic discourse and the racialized political struggles in the country. This section reads with the most cohesion, perhaps because it is anchored to the orienting introduction. Furthermore, the essay on the absence of the Israel/Palestine question in (post)colonial studies offers both the most provocative and novel intervention in the book.

In the book’s second part, Stoler provides three chapters that demonstrate how concepts and epistemes employed to interrogate colonial history function to confuse or even propagate contemporary imperial projects. This section’s first chapter considers the conditions of ‘imperial sovereignty’ with specific attention to the functionality of exclusion (i.e. who is authorized with political membership in colonial relations) and exemption (i.e. justifying colonial violence through exceptionalism.) The second chapter interrogates the Enlightenment not only as the intellectual background to colonial governance historically but also how current logics of ‘unreason’ orchestrate violent security regimes, especially in a post 9/11 world. The third chapter looks specifically at how categories of race are produced both *in situ* and through contemporary historiography by reviewing 19th and 20th century colonial archives in which Dutch and French colonialists articulated racialized categories that determined the distribution of social power and the ways in which current scholarship differentiates historical and contemporary racism. This section moves between lenses of time, location, and discipline with each chapter, producing a broad set of examples, to be sure, but I was left longing for a little more historical specificity for concepts such as ‘imperial sovereignty.’ But what is sacrificed with specificity is gained back with an attempt to draw a red thread between apparently discreet historical periods and places in order to reveal imperial endurance.

The third part joins two essays which continue the discussion on racism in France with the book’s final chapter on the physicality of imperial ruins and decay. The section is a final demonstration of the temporal layers of imperialism, which bridge past with present via contingency rather than continuity. The section’s first chapter asks how the type of common sense exploited by the *Front National* functioned to reify notions of social kind that support colonial power structures. The middle chapter investigates the biopolitical dimensions (intimacy, sexual politics and categories of carnal knowledge) of imperialism via Anglophone and Francophone scholarship. The book concludes with a

consideration of the tangibility or perceptibility of imperial duress in ruins and decay – for example the effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam. This section showcases Stoler’s deep understanding and study of race and politics in France. As populist party politics gain momentum across Europe, the study of the *Front National’s* rise to power offers an understanding of how such things come to pass, something which is easier to do retrospectively than concurrently and that Stoler’s academic and political experience in France avails itself to doing.

While these chapters make great leaps through time (sometimes covering more than a century in historical generalization) and space (historical particularism is exchanged for concept-development), Stoler convincingly emphasizes the universal need to consider the world’s imperial dimensions regardless of discipline, geography, or time. She blends political analysis with academic discourse precisely to demonstrate the relation between the two. The fourth chapter on “colonial aphasia” (p. 122) is the strongest example of the relationship between concept-work and material reality. In it, she asks: What is the relationship between the 2005 French riots, which illustrated the frustrations over racialized inequity and violence, and the “strange silence” (p. 131 – 132) in French scholarship regarding colonial history and its buoyant structures? “Colonial aphasia,” or the inability to retrieve sufficient vocabularies to describe coloniality, is a resonant concept for the memory politics with which much of the world is engaged.

Though the bibliography is impressive in length and Stoler’s engagement with Foucault, Said, and Fanon is expert and formidable – dissenting voices from the Global South are conspicuously absent from much of the book. These collected works are concentrated on the enduring logics of imperial domination and the conceptual smokescreens that protect and conceal such projects over time. However, the book omits the other side of imperial domination, the forces with which it must contend: resistance. If concepts, as Stoler argues, “do work and work on us” (p. 173) and thus a conceptual restructuring is necessary to reorder both the understanding and materiality of imperialism then surely that new opening must include making use of parallel anti-imperial movements of the past and present.

German Abstract:

Enthüllung des Kolonialismus im gesunden Menschenverstand – damals und heute

Mit der Essay-Sammlung *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times* trägt Ann Stoler zur Konzeptarbeit über die andauernden und ständig wandelnden Beziehungen zwischen kolonialer Vergangenheit und heutiger politischer Realität bei. Mit einer breiten geographischen sowie thematischen Spanne untersucht Stoler den Effekt akademischer und politischer Konzeptualisierung von imperialer Geschichte auf die Kontrolle der Parameter mit denen wir die heutige Welt verstehen und wie sich, als direkte Konsequenz, imperiale Strukturen und Beziehungen wandeln. In ihrer Analyse schlägt Stoler neue Herangehensweisen vor, um das *koloniale Innereien (colonial entrails)* sichtbar zu machen. Diese orientieren sich an drei Hauptinteressen: 1) Der Einfluss von Konzepten auf die Schaffung, Reflektion und Erhaltung von Ungleichheit. 2) Die Schwierigkeit der historischen Arbeit mit kolonialer Geschichte, welche eng mit der heutigen geopolitischen Lage verflochten ist. 3) Das bewusste Verlernen (*unlearning*) kolonialer Regierungsführung und das kritische Befassen mit Missverständnissen. Als Ergänzung zur üblichen historischen und politischen Analyse bietet *Duress* den Lesenden methodisches Handwerk zur Verdeutlichung imperiale Beziehungen.

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