

Review: John Phillip Short, *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2012.

In this substantially researched and concisely written book, John Phillip Short uncovers the complex influences of colonialism on Wilhelmine society in an age of mass culture and politics. He explores the manifold ways in which colonialism permeated the cultural life of the metropole from the beginnings of the German colonial empire in 1884 to the so-called Hottentot elections of 1907. If colonialism originated as an aristocratic and upper middle-class concern, it quickly broadened by the late 1890s to include the interests of workers. Colonialism could not remain an elite affair with the accelerating transformation of Imperial Germany into a modern capitalist society of class divisions, party politics, consumerism, and commodification. A kind of popular colonialism (*Volkskolonialismus*) emerged that attracted workers and perhaps even some peasants to the colonial world fantasized by dime novels, lectures, exhibitions, traveling shows, postcards, and illustrated magazines. One form of this popular colonialism – inspiration for the book's title – was a traveling magic lantern show, a simultaneous projection of several images, which provided picturesque excursions into the colonial world for Germans living far from it.

Short's book combines, then, social and cultural history in an analysis of working-class encounters with imaginations of empire. In so doing, he

advances three overarching arguments about the circulation and production of colonial knowledge in the metropole. His first argument turns on the tension between the elitist origins of this knowledge and the growing diversification of German society by the *fin de siècle*. Short suggests that colonial knowledge originated in the male bourgeois sphere of Germany's institutional and associational life. The German Colonial Society (*Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft*) stood at the center of the movement to promote colonialism by producing knowledge about it. Founded in 1887, the Colonial Society viewed colonialism as the purview of educated and propertied men, but it soon recognized that knowledge of Germany's empire should be widely disseminated throughout German society. It pursued a propaganda effort of exhibitions, mass meetings, and newspaper articles to popularize colonialism.

Yet, it is not entirely clear if the working class actually needed to be "educated" or not. Short's second argument – his most original claim – suggests that workers knew a substantial amount about colonialism and actively engaged the issue. The rank and file of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) appeared at once interested in and critical of Germany's colonial possessions. While both the leadership of the SPD and their constituents opposed colonialism in Short's view (including even after the Hottentot elections when conventional wisdom has the SPD increasingly revising its position to a colonialist one), many workers could not resist the allure of empire. They became fascinated by it and created their own eclectic form of

colonialism. Workers read tales about German adventures in the colonies and wrote letters to the Imperial Colonial Office expressing a desire to participate in the colonial project.

This more beguiling working-class colonialism may have conflicted in form with the more sober colonialism of the upper middle class. But in content they were essentially the same. These two forms of colonialism came together to produce the conditions for the spread of colonial imaginations in Imperial Germany. This assertion amounts to Short's third argument: the productive tension between working and middle class styles of colonialism generated something close to a consolidated understanding of the world in Wilhelmine society, a worldview shaped by notions of race, competition, and reification. As Short explains: "Colonialism both reproduced and eroded class differences in Germany, and it was out of this tension that, ultimately, a more supple, sinuous colonial discourse developed, reflected in revisionism and the ineluctable appeal of colonial knowledge — a discourse that penetrated all classes" (p. 146).

This last argument may trigger some debate; the first one will contribute to the on-going effort among historians to recover the influences of colonialism on the metropole. The middle argument deserves some further reflection insofar as it raises, ultimately, an important question for the study of modern European colonialism. Short's argument about the attraction of the working class to colonialism hinges on the issue of autonomy. He wants to insist that workers became attracted to colonialism

on their own terms. He thus rejects the Marxist-inflected interpretation that Germany's capitalist elite offered colonialism to workers as an economic palliative because it putatively denies workers their "agency or autonomous experience" (pp. 3 and 79). This critique may come across as compelling, and one can certainly appreciate Short's impatience with the dogmatism of certain Marxist approaches to understanding the past. Even so, one must ask: Did workers really have as much agency as Short makes them out as possessing in the hierarchical and unequal society of Imperial Germany? Did workers enjoy the same scope of autonomy as, say, Colonial Society members or state officials did? If not, does it make sense to conceptualize workers as autonomous?

Perhaps we can come at these complex questions by turning to the voices of workers themselves, to the letters sent to the Imperial Colonial Office that Short richly discusses. These letters express a common desire to escape one's current career and settle into a new life in the colonies. They tell of restlessness with the monotony of modern life and a desire for novelty, an urge for adventure in the capitalist exploits of colonialism. These letters tell of boredom, that most quotidian of human emotions.

Boredom has a history. It seems to be a profoundly modern emotion. Humans have of course likely always been restless, but they come across as especially bored, or at least more loquacious about their boredom, in the modern period when their time and labor is regularized and quantified by industrial

capitalism.¹ The repetitive tasks of factory and office work have generated tremendous discussion about boredom over the past two centuries. If work often emerges as the primary source of boredom, then seeking a new career becomes one of the main remedies to it. The problem becomes the answer. One finds liberation precisely in the circumscribed, careerist terms set by capitalism in response to an emotion intensified by capitalism. As one worker wrote: "Since it is my greatest wish to get to learn commerce in the colonies, I approach you with the request whether you can perhaps do something for me. [...] Until my fourteenth year I attended elementary school, learned baking for three years but then gave it up again for reasons of health and came to the Bremen Besigheimer oil factory, where I am in my fourth year and hold the position of registrar" (p. 65).

While Short insightfully notes the implied boredom expressed in this letter, he underplays the capitalist context that frames it, including the capitalist understanding of freedom that underpins it: this letter writer locates liberation from boredom in the capitalist freedoms of commerce, movement, and occupation. Do workers such as this letter writer freely choose these freedoms? That is a very tricky question. One could argue that these freedoms exist as practically the only choices available to Imperial German workers amid the hegemonic

authority of capitalism, and that, furthermore, they are false freedoms masked as true freedoms *à la* Herbert Marcuse.² If that is so, then the attraction of workers to colonialism surfaces as hardly autonomous at all. A skeptic may critique such a Marxist reading in many ways, not least that it rests on a reductive understanding of the past, but it may be equally reductive to close off entertaining the possibility of such a reading when studying the history of modern European colonialism. Can historians examine modern colonialism without fully considering the political, economic, and discursive power of capitalism? Does not Marx still have something to say on this matter worth thinking through intricately? By prompting these questions, Short has written a stimulating book.

Michael Meng
Clemson University, South Carolina

¹ For a most perceptive discussion of boredom, see Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995.

² Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969.