INTRODUCTION

Rhetorics of empire
Martin Thomas and Richard Toye

What part does rhetoric play in sustaining empires? What is the connection between public language and the structure of imperial power? And what role does public speech play in undermining empires and bringing them to an end? This book addresses these questions with reference to a wide range of case studies, from the South African War at the dawn of the twentieth century to the death-throes of European empires three generations later. Imperial rhetoric, we argue, camouflaged the violence of empires but was, at the same time, used to conjure images of imperial progress and generous decolonization. The chapters that follow thus explore the rhetorical devices used by political and military leaders, administrators, investors and lobbyists to justify colonial domination before domestic and foreign audiences. Some investigate the ways in which notorious instances of colonial violence and counter-violence were depicted in the international public sphere. Others explore discourses of imperialist modernization and the language of ‘civilizing’. Also examined are the means by which opponents of colonialism mobilized alternative rhetorics of rights and freedoms to challenge imperialist claims.

The essays collected here provide sustained analysis of imperial rhetoric from a multi-empire perspective. Our coverage does not claim to be fully comprehensive in geographic terms but contributors highlight several themes that, we hope, will stimulate further work on rhetorics of empire. The opening chapters by Elizabeth Van Heyningen and Simon Mackley address the centrality of rival rhetoric claims during the South African War, approaching this theme from both Boer and British perspectives. The US-focused chapters by Charlie Laderman and Andrew Preston take the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt respectively as case studies to examine the ways in which American presidential rhetoric defined the strongly pro-imperial political culture of the early twentieth century.
United States and the subsequent anti-colonial turn in the rhetoric of American grand strategy at the height of FDR’s wartime administration. The Second World War’s capacity to tear empires apart was felt especially strongly by France. As a defeated nation, its colonial possessions were intrinsic to the competing assertions of sovereign power, global interest and reformist potential of the rival Vichy and Free French regimes. Rachel Chin and Martin Shipway explore these issues of wartime division and postwar empire reconstruction. The former does so from the perspective of defeat and imperial disintegration as evinced by Britain’s bombardment of the French fleet at Mers el-Kébir. The latter does so from the viewpoint of reform-minded officials at a restored French Colonial Ministry seeking to rebuild a case for French imperial legitimacy in the immediate aftermath of the war.

The six remaining chapters examine, from a variety of perspectives, the post-1945 years of decolonization and its aftermath. Matthew Stanard and Andreas Stucki stress the significance of imperial rhetoric to Belgium and Spain respectively. Both nations were, to some degree, imperial outsiders. Belgium was hidebound by a lack of resources and, increasingly, by international opprobrium and transnational opposition as its vast Congolese domains imploded into secessionist violence. Francoist Spain’s isolation from both the international community and the networks of European and African trade only increased the determination among colonial administrators and educators in Spanish Africa to demonstrate the cutting-edge modernity and welfarist capabilities of Spanish colonial governance. As Stucki indicates, these efforts were more shadow than substance, their rhetorical sophistication concealing their limited material outcome.

Martin Thomas and Richard Toye investigate the violent dynamics of imperial rhetoric at the height of the most shocking conflicts in French and British decolonization. Thomas revisits notorious instances of massacre during Algeria’s war of independence to illustrate the ways in which violence itself was employed as a rhetorical weapon, mass killings being used as displays of power both to enforce social control locally and to harden opposition to the war globally. Toye examines British official reactions to another infamous case of late colonial violence – the killings of alleged Mau Mau supporters at Kenya’s Hola detention camps in 1959 – to show how rhetoric could be employed both to obfuscate and even to excuse the starkest rights abuses. Claims that Hola represented the moment that Britain suddenly woke up to the brutality of empire are shown to be misleading.

Finally, the chapters by Elizabeth Buettner and Harshen Kumarasingham take us beyond the formal ends of colonial rule to explore the ways in which decolonization and its postcolonial lega-
cies were represented within societies adjusting to the loss of empire. Buettner offers an expansive view of Western European political cultures in which remarkable commonalities emerged in the shared depiction of successive decolonizations in visceral terms of decay. Kumarasingham shows the enduring relevance of the imperial rhetorics and symbolisms in postcolonial spaces, discourses which even now are being reshaped in the post-Brexit age. By addressing both the discourses of imperial assertion which settlers and metropolitan elites employed, and the anti-imperial campaigns that sought to discredit them, the collection casts light on the internationalist ideologies that emerged from the competitive tensions between these two modes of discussion. To put it another way, the languages of humanitarianism, development and ‘international community’ that shape our understandings of world affairs today are to a great extent the product of the symbiotic relationship between pro- and anti-empire rhetorics that dominated much of the twentieth century.¹

Rhetorics: imperial and anti-colonial

Our emphasis on rhetorics in the plural is important. On the one hand, empires took many forms, methods of governance and the claims made for them changing over time. Furthermore, informal empire – the domination of one country by another stopping short of full legal title – manifested itself in different fashions, ranging from one-sided trading arrangements through protectorates and diarchies, to coercive military deployments short of direct occupation.² These different ways of exercising power necessarily required particular forms of justification, if only to mask the coercive practices and economic imbalances that rendered them possible in the first place. Equally, colonial peoples found ways to express their agency by exploiting the administrative complexities and the overlapping laws and jurisdictions produced by these multifarious systems of imperial governance. Colonial rule, in other words, sometimes opened new modes of expression for those living under it.³

These trends point to commonalities in colonial experiences. But much was culturally specific about imperial languages, which were deployed in radically varying metropolitan political systems and in myriad local circumstances. Quentin Skinner has described the ‘rhetorical perspective’ as that which interests itself in ‘the kinds of debate that take place when we ask whether a given action or state of affairs does or does not license us to apply some particular evaluative term as an apt description of it’.⁴ To take a classic example of this type of debate, consider how the reputation of South African leader Jan
Christiaan Smuts changed fundamentally, or was re-evaluated, over time. A master of political reinvention, Smuts’s political life traced an arc from Afrikaner nationalist to apostle of Anglo-South African reconciliation and leading Commonwealth statesman. An architect of the League of Nations and the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights and venerated in Britain during both world wars, Smuts’s unwavering commitment to white minority rule in South Africa was his reputational undoing. To many observers, his oft-quoted rhetorical phrasing – the British Empire as ‘commonwealth of nations’, the League Covenant as instrument of liberal internationalist order, the United Nations (UN) as defender of ‘basic human rights’ – was rendered hypocritical by Smuts’s attachment to racist rule in his South African homeland. The UN meanwhile shifted from condemning the apartheid system, which Smuts’s political opponents established formally after his fall from power, to criminalizing it.5

Anti-imperial rhetorics were equally dynamic. There were fundamental variations in content, tone and priority between the anti-colonialism articulated by indigenous nationalists and that of their sympathizers in the ‘mother country’ (a familial metaphor of a type to which we return). Anti-colonialism, while consistent in its opposition to invasive forms of foreign social control, was also responsive to shifts in the politics of ethnic, group, and individual rights. The rhetoric surrounding nationhood, self-determination and human rights both shaped and reflected wider twentieth-century changes in international relations and international law. Another factor to consider is what we call the ‘Arab café radio’ problem. That is to say, the impact of political statements was substantially a matter of reception, something that was, in turn, affected by the cultural environment in which those statements were heard. Arabic radio transmissions were sites of intense colonial conflict in French Algeria from their inception in the 1930s, much as they were throughout the wider Middle Eastern colonial world.6 By the 1950s the sophistication of vernacular ‘Arab radio’ was matched by the significance of its political message. Returning to Algeria, for instance, the authenticity conferred on Algerian nationalist propaganda by interspersing it with popular Berber folk music alarmed French observers – and censors. Effective rhetoric, in other words, was attuned not just to its audience but also to its setting.7

The impact of radio (and, later, televisual) propaganda was also contingent on the factual plausibility and rhetorical clarity of the broadcasts concerned. This was something well understood by the BBC’s Middle East Service and the Foreign Office handlers of Sharq al-Adna, a British government-sponsored radio station based initially in Mandate Palestine until its relocation to Cyprus in 1948. Characterized as a
‘BBC light programme’ for Arab listeners across the Middle East, Sharq al-Adna reached the same local constituencies targeted by Algeria’s Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). As one local diplomat conceded, its message got through to café listeners because its commentaries were phrased in no-nonsense, tabloid style.⁸ Although ultimately compromised by the Nasserite pan-Arabism proclaimed by Radio Cairo, until the mid-1950s at least, Britain’s Arabic broadcasters retained a rhetorical edge over anti-colonial opponents and fellow imperial powers alike.⁹ As this example indicates, imperial and anti-colonial arguments, whether aimed at different audiences or striving for the same audience’s attention, competed on the same rhetorical terrain.

The public spheres of metropolitan and colonial societies, the minds of peoples in whose name empires were built and those of peoples in whose name they would be torn down: these were what defined – and what comprised – this fiercely contested cognitive space.¹⁰ It is this shared contestation that links the statements of political leaders in London, Lisbon or Paris with the claims of their colonial opponents thousands of miles away.

As this observation implies, if we are interested in the variety of imperial rhetorics, we also aim to discern their shared characteristics. The reputation of empires was rhetorically constructed, an impersonal equivalent of the reputations of the predominantly nineteenth-century empire-makers whom contemporaries venerated as heroes. Moving forward, the debunking of cherished imperial myths – of selfless altruism and higher ethical purpose, of dispassionate fairness and ‘colour-blindness’ – became a favoured tactic for countless anti-colonialist activists and commentators.¹¹ As this implies, the claims made by excluded colonial subjects to enhanced rights under law as fully fledged imperial citizens were also rhetorically constructed phenomena, part of the same cyclical process of empire construction and destruction.¹² At the personal level, changes to imperial rhetoric built and destroyed reputations, making and unmaking heroes and the empires they were held to personify.¹³ As John MacKenzie reminds us, heroic reputations were propagated by discrete groups – by colleagues and disciples in the first instance, by politicians, journalists and popular writers in the last. What united these groups was their shared interest in disseminating particular, often emotive, messages confirming the bond between empire, patriotism and personal sacrifice. Whatever the political motivation involved, this form of social construction, with its accentuation of an individual’s supposedly exemplary qualities, lent itself to exaggeration.¹⁴ One consequence was a fondness for inflated rhetoric, typically articulated in comparably hyperbolic terms by the supporters of rival empires.¹⁵
RHETORICS OF EMPIRE

Profound changes in the tenor and content of imperialist language, the emergence of new media to disseminate or refute imperialists’ claims, and the waxing and waning of imperial reputations: each of these examples points to critical shifts in imperial rhetoric over the last century or so. From the ebullience of Europe’s ‘new imperialism’ at the height of colonial expansion in the late nineteenth century to present-day controversies over the reality or otherwise of American ‘empire’ and neo-colonial influence, the meanings attached to imperial rhetoric have altered dramatically over the last century. As the chapters in this collection illustrate, use of the very word ‘empire’, whether proud or pejorative, comes filled with cultural presumption and political implication. By examining these issues in particular metropolitan and colonial contexts, the chapters offer insights into something else: imperial rhetoric as a pervasive, transnational phenomenon.

Thus, Andreas Stucki’s chapter suggests that colonizers shared an ‘international language’; Elizabeth Buettner’s shows that this involved a paradox. She reviews the claims to exceptionality made by European imperial powers, whose discourses of uniqueness belied the underlying similarities between them. An exceptionalist component was essential to imperial rhetoric, something that, as Matthew Stanard has demonstrated elsewhere, was also to be found in the shared cultural and commemorative practices of Europe’s imperialist publics. Read this way, the British Empire was qualitatively different – and ethically superior – to those of its rivals because of the unique skills brought to it by its British rulers. Of course, according to their respective supporters, so too were the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese and, it seems, all other empires. Put differently, most imperialists were also fervently nationalistic and, as a result, were at pains to refute the basic similarity in forms of colonial domination between empires. The resulting rhetorics of empire were never confined to closed circles of governors and imperial lobby groups. Very often these messages of administrative élan, civilizing intent and the rule of (Western) law were recycled by specialist academics, among them historians of empire, multiple ethnologists and anthropologists, who together comprised a supportive intellectual community that reinforced the imperialist rhetoric of politicians and government. These academic disciplines lent the weight of scholarly judgement to everything from concepts of race science and civilizational hierarchy to the legitimation of imperialism as a cultural practice.

The supreme irony, then, is that the rhetorical insistence on distinctiveness was repeated in other European imperial centres in essentially comparable terms. As Buettner notes, ‘upon closer comparative inspection, exceptionalist claims quickly reveal themselves
as anything but’. It is even arguable whether those claiming that their variety of colonialism was singularly benevolent were not, at the same time, aware that inter-imperial competition had its limits. Whatever the rhetorical rivalries they engendered, empire building and empire dissolution for much of the twentieth century ran along parallel tracks. What Richard Drayton has labelled the ‘masked condominium’, the underlying shared interests of European imperial states in sustaining an international society built on a normative presumption of the global North’s dominion over the global South, set firm, if intangible, boundaries to the rhetorical clashes between the rulers of different empires.

For all that, exceptionalist claims were remarkably persistent. All rested on prior comparison, their assertions of difference based on the perceived or alleged inadequacies of rivals. So powerful was this rhetoric of civilizing mission that even those it belittled could be drawn to it. Thus in the early 1900s we find even some African-American Church leaders and committed anti-imperialists claiming that black Americans could prove their rightful claims to equality by serving in the United States’ colonial wars or bringing Christian civilization to newly-subjugated African territories. As Paul Kramer explains:

it was often at precisely the places where imperial situations converged and overlapped that actors felt compelled to shore up exceptionalist comparisons that emphasized decreasingly perceptible differences between themselves and others.

Rhetoric and violence

Rhetoric, moreover, was central to the ways in which the rulers of empire, their domestic supporters and their anticolonial opponents enacted, justified or condemned the subjugation of colonial populations. The collection reflects this, with several chapters cohering around the theme of violence. Settlers, estate overseers and colonial administrators were apt to describe the possibilities of workplace unrest and minor dissent as harbingers of revolt in which isolated Europeans would be literally overwhelmed by an emotive and potentially fanatical local population. Colonial legal regimes designed in practice to limit the permissible space for political opposition and community organization were, paradoxically, defended as foundation stones of orderly administration, labour discipline and social modernization. Restrictive legal codes such as the French colonial indigénat, the Coolie Ordinances applied in Dutch Indonesia and British India, or the Master and Servant regulations enacted in British East Africa, all prescribed harsh labour obligations and arbitrary punishments for
subject populations. Yet each was rhetorically depicted as something else: not as racially coded instruments of coercion but as necessary guarantors of cultural elevation, social stability and wealth creation.\textsuperscript{25}

As Taylor Sherman has emphasized with colonial India much in mind, ‘far from being limited to a single institution, penal practices ranged from firing on crowds and bombing from the air, to dismissal from one’s place of work or study, collective fines, confiscation of property, as well as imprisonment, corporal and capital punishment’.\textsuperscript{26} Little wonder that such an array of coercive practices demanded an armoury of rhetorical arguments to excuse them.

Thus, discrete languages of imperial power were conflated into an identifiable rhetoric of repression. If this might be termed the ‘official voice’ of coercive legal sanction, repetitive in its insistence on the requirement for public obedience, behind it lay myriad competing arguments. Politicians and governors’ statements about order and progress ran up against the blunt facts of military operations and the sweeping extension of legal powers needed to guide soldiers and police – and, potentially at least, to protect them from possible prosecution for acts of criminal violence. Nowhere were these clashes more obvious than in the final years of British rule in Ireland between the Easter Rising of 1916 and the enactment of partition in 1922.\textsuperscript{27} Where army officers needed clarity about the circumstances in which lethal force could be used during a civil emergency, ministers in the Lloyd George coalition preferred ambiguity.\textsuperscript{28} Soldiers feared being dragged through the courts if they crossed the line between the legitimate use of violence against sedition and the murder of civilians. British political leaders, by contrast, attached greater weight to the threat implicit in martial law than its application. Lloyd George’s government, in other words, valued the rhetorical threat of heightened repression over its actual application, recognizing that the resort to martial law signified the abandonment of a civilian-led political process and its replacement by military rule.\textsuperscript{29} The dilemma here – between the politicians’ preference for an imperial language of threatened coercion and the generals’ recognition that such rhetoric was liable to fail unless it was backed up by force on the ground – was set to recur throughout the final decades of European colonialism.

Another important rhetorical development arose from the establishment of Middle Eastern, African and Pacific Island mandates following the victor powers’ redistribution of colonial spoils after the First World War. The mandates system not only created new variants of imperial rule but also gave rise to unprecedented international oversight through the League of Nations’ Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC).\textsuperscript{30} The underlying notion of territories held in trust fostered particular styles of rhetorical justification by the mandate holders, often
in response to episodes of internal revolt suppressed in decidedly old-fashioned ‘colonial’ ways. Conversely, the turbulence of the Middle East mandates, British-ruled Palestine and French-administered Syria especially, proved instrumental to the growth of formal petitioning to the League. Nationalist groups, anti-colonial advocates and legal experts marginalized within the mandates’ governmental structures submitted scores of petitions to the PMC, the rhetorical force of which belied their limited capacity to achieve immediate changes in imperial governance. While much of the discursive power of such claims-making derived from its exposure of racially coded state violence, its more abstract concern was sovereignty and the manifest gap between the juridical rights of mandate peoples as citizens of proto-states and their day-to-day experiences of foreign rule.

Moving forward through the twentieth century, even the more widespread resort to martial law and states of emergency characteristic of organized rebellion and contested decolonization were represented rhetorically as restorative measures. Martial law is an oxymoronic term. By its very nature, it signifies the negation of civil legal process in favour of sweeping military powers. Yet it was still defended rhetorically by numerous colonial governments as essentially benign – a more limited ‘police action’ or a ‘for their own good’ – device employed to weed out a few rebellious troublemakers from an otherwise placid colonial population. While British governments after 1945 rejected the imposition of martial law during colonial uprisings, their resort to the alternative formulation of ‘emergency powers’ reflected their political preference for a non-military formulation that was easier to defend rhetorically before domestic and international audiences. Often the insurgents were infantilized, and sometimes feminized, in official rhetoric, their actions portrayed as irrational, emotive and therefore illegitimate. In these circumstances it was perhaps inevitable that some of the most implacable opponents of empire would elevate violence to a new rhetorical level. The best-known archetype here remains Frantz Fanon, a figure whose views (and their rejection by others) are discussed by Martin Thomas in Chapter 9. The Algeria-based psychiatrist theorized the Algerian FLN’s insurgency against French colonial rule as a conjoined act of physical and mental emancipation in which violence worked as a collective catharsis purifying Algerians of years of subjugation through revolutionary action.

Language and rhetoric

Clearly, organized violence posed particular rhetorical challenges to empires’ rhetoricians. The rulers and supporters of empire needed to
claim that – unlike other countries’ – theirs was not coercive, that it ruled with approbation of the subject peoples, with whom, supposedly, it engaged in partnership rather than oppression. This required the use of ‘oblique strategies’ (to use Quentin Skinner’s term) in order ‘to set out and at the same time to disguise’ the nature of imperial power, which needed to be simultaneously visible and deniable.

In order to appreciate why this was so, it is important to recognize that ‘imperialism’ – much more so, initially, than ‘Empire’ – was something of a dirty word throughout the period with which we are concerned. In 1878, Britain’s Saturday Review referred to it as a ‘new-fangled term over which there is much unprofitable controversy’. In Britain, in particular, the word brought to mind Napoleon III and the French Second Empire; as such, it was linked with despotic governance and the abuse of power as much as with the acquisition of territory. Thus, in his celebrated Midlothian Campaign of 1879–80, Gladstone could simultaneously denounce the ‘imperialism’ of Disraeli, his Conservative opponent, and speak positively of a British Empire that was to be ruled in line with the principles of ‘benevolence and mercy’. This is not to say that the negative interpretation of imperialism was ubiquitous: Joseph Chamberlain famously advised his fellow citizens to ‘Learn to think Imperially’. Yet, as Simon Mackley’s chapter shows, the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ imperialisms was highly important in Liberal thinking. Even J.A. Hobson, one of the foremost British domestic critics of the Boer War, distinguished between perverted, capitalist-driven ‘imperialism’, and a more benign self-governing settler colonialism, which he considered could act as ‘a natural overflow of nationality’.

Later, of course, ‘colonialism’, too, developed negative connotations from which metropolitan politicians and settler colonists sought to distance themselves. Thus, as the British Empire entered the final stages of its decline, the 1959 Conservative Party manifesto boasted that former colonial peoples had been ‘helped to nationhood within the British Commonwealth’, a narrative which it used to challenge ‘mis-representation about British “colonialism”’. One way for empires to rebut allegations of brutality and atavism was to present themselves not merely as humane but as distinctively modern – a theme explored in several chapters here, notably Elizabeth van Heyningen’s and Richard Toye’s. Conversely, as Harshan Kumarasingham indicates, for several Commonwealth countries the replication of imperial ceremonial in their Parliaments harnessed Westminster-style rituals to the invention of traditions in postcolonial representative democracy.

Winston Churchill was a figure who, in his mature period, positively revelled in striking a consciously ‘old-fashioned’ imperial
stance, seemingly in contradistinction to more prevalent rhetorics of imperial modernity. Yet Churchill too shared the common view that the role of empire was to modernize territories and subject peoples: ‘Civilization must be armed with machinery if she is to subdue these wild regions to her authority’, runs a typical passage in his account of his 1907 East African travels. At the same time, politicians often competed among themselves, both before and during the era of decolonization, to legitimize their visions of Empire (and how it ought to be dismantled) by representing them as more modern than those of their rivals. This was an aspect of the paradox offered by Hobson, that whereas ‘Each nation, as it watches from outside the Imperialism of its neighbours, is not deceived […] no nation sees its own shortcomings.’

Hobson’s overall critique, moreover, is still worth taking seriously. If his account of imperial economics is questionable (and its anti-Semitic tinge deplorable), his analysis of imperialist rhetoric still stands up incredibly well today. Take, for example, this passage, in which he uses irony to skewer the profoundly flawed but superficially plausible argument that it is natural for the most ‘socially efficient’ (i.e. Western imperialist) nations to dominate and that it is at the same time morally incumbent upon them to attempt to do so:

So easily we glide from natural history to ethics, and find in utility a moral sanction for the race struggle. Now, Imperialism is nothing but this natural history doctrine, regarded from the standpoint of one’s own nation. We represent the socially efficient nation, we have conquered and acquired dominion and territory in the past: we must go on, it is our destiny, one which is serviceable to ourselves and to the world, our duty.

Thus, emerging from natural history, the doctrine soon takes on a large complexity of ethical and religious finery, and we are wafted into an elevated atmosphere of ‘imperial Christianity,’ a ‘mission of civilization,’ in which we are to teach ‘the arts of good government’ and ‘the dignity of labour.’

Much of the subtlety of Hobson’s analysis lay in his recognition that those who supported imperialism were not necessarily hypocrites, and that some of them had motives that were noble if naïve. Because – on Hobson’s assumption – the growth of empire was not in the interests of the nation as a whole, but benefited only certain capitalist cliques, the money-makers (in collusion with a willing press) needed to persuade the voters to act against their own wellbeing. Whether or not he had correctly identified the precise mechanisms, this claim provides an insight into the importance of rhetoric in sustaining empire. It was not merely a surface phenomenon that was insignificant relative to the ‘real’ economic and political forces that drove imperialism. Rather, it had an active role to play in making those forces effective. At the same
time, imperial rhetoric could be contested, and hence was not inevitabi-
lly dominant. It was perpetually unstable and required constant refor-
mulation to meet new times, threats and circumstances. Indeed, one
notable phenomenon of the period was the ‘anti-imperialist imperial-
ism’ of the USA (compellingly described in Andrew Preston’s chapter
on Franklin D. Roosevelt), which – again ironically – was in some ways
similar to the anti-imperialist claims of the USSR.

Our view of rhetoric, then, can be distinguished from the
Foucauldian/Saidian approach, which argues that social reality is con-
structed by discourse, in the interests of the powerful.51 There is, of
course, much to be said in favour of that approach. Michel Foucault
argued that:

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that
is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true;
the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and
false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques
and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of
those who are charged with saying what counts as true.52

The ways in which Foucauldian notions might be applied to imperial
societies and regimes was made clear in Edward Said’s Orientalism,
which recast this term so that it referred to the structures of knowl-
dge – or rather discourse – through which Westerners constructed
the image of the East. Europeans, he suggested had typically cast
‘the Orient’ as simultaneously fascinating and effete, mysterious and
corrupt. Such constructions were disempowering and oppressive.53
Foucault and Said offered shrewd conceptualizations, but their per-
spectives have limitations. Sandra Lee Bartky has noted that ‘Foucault
seems sometimes on the verge of depriving us of a vocabulary in which
to conceptualize the nature and meaning of those periodic refusals
of control which, just as much of the imposition of control, mark
the course of human history.’54 Similarly, Said’s approach might be
thought to deny agency to colonial or marginalized subjects by pre-
senting them as the permanent victims of the Western truth regime. In
other words, although the Foucault/Said positions help explain the rise
and long-term persistence of empires, they have less to say about the
ways in which their hegemony was ultimately undermined.

We take the position that, although language certainly influences
reality, it does not determine it. In fact, great powers’ attempts at
imposing control via linguistic manipulation – as seen, for example,
in Rachel Chin’s chapter – although frequently meeting with success
across wide areas and timeframes, generally contain within them the
seeds of hubris. Telling, in this respect, are the notorious 2004 remarks
of an unnamed aide to US President George W. Bush. (The aide is widely believed to have been Karl Rove). As journalist Ron Suskind recounted:

The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’ … ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’

It need hardly be said that the actual outcome of the Bush administration's foreign adventures suggests something different. In spite of the enormous military and rhetorical power which empires have wielded as they have attempted to reshape the world in their own image, the ‘reality-based community’ has often had the last laugh.

Now well established, the so-called ‘new imperial history’ has had much to say about imperial discourse, acknowledging a debt to the preoccupation with discursive constructions of knowledge and power central to postcolonialist scholarship. The notion of ‘imperial rhetoric’ has also attracted attention, albeit to a lesser degree. There remains much to learn from the extensive American scholarship on political rhetoric, which has a long and impressive lineage. The still-influential Quarterly Journal of Speech was founded in 1915, and, partly due to concerns about citizenship education, the discipline of Rhetoric (alternatively Speech and Communication) has flourished in the USA to a much greater extent than in the UK. Since the turn of the twenty-first century there has been something of a renaissance in the study of rhetoric, as applied to British politics. Our aim in this volume is to develop insights gained from these various literatures in the sphere of empire history, across a range of countries, in order to illuminate the question of what gave imperial rhetorics their explicitly ‘imperial’ character.

For the purposes of this book, ‘rhetoric’ is defined in terms of public forms of communication with a persuasive or symbolic purpose. On the one hand, we see it as something narrower than discourse (which includes the private), although naturally we are concerned with how public statements reflected or contradicted what was said behind the scenes. On the other hand, we view it as something wider than ‘oratory’; we are interested in written and visual rhetorics as well as spoken ones. Rebel success in colonial revolt demanded intimate knowledge of security force practices. Such knowledge was swiftly
put to rhetorical use in visual displays of power designed to undermine official claims of violence curbed and state security restored. As Martin Thomas’s chapter shows, even violence has its own forms of rhetoric. Its actors perform it with an awareness of how it will be portrayed and communicated, in order to maximize its moral and coercive effect: hence the benefit of an anthropological approach to the performative aspects of violence that places issues of audience and reception at the centre of the analysis.

**Locating imperial rhetoric**

Rhetoric is a social phenomenon. It is essentially about relationships: about the relationships between speakers, writers and (historical) actors and their respective audiences; and about the relationship of audience members to each other. We agree with Donald Davidson, however, that the recognition that ‘there is an irreducibly social element in determining what it is that we mean’ does not imply ‘a relativistic idea of truth’. As he explains, although the meaning of a specific sentence may alter over time on account of social change, this does not prevent it being true (or untrue) in a specific context. But the consequence of this is that rhetoric cannot be reduced simply to a series of figures, tropes or techniques, the meaning of which can be definitively unlocked by a particular analytical key, as one would crack a code. Thus, Ferdinand de Saussure’s ‘conception of a language as a socially shared, psychologically real system of signs’ remains relevant today. Nevertheless, the key question of how historical forces operate to change language – and indeed whether language itself does fundamentally change – seems as problematic as it did when Saussure was writing, over a century ago.

On this basis it should be clear that the methods of analysis devised by Classical and Renaissance rhetoricians, although useful, are not alone sufficient to unlock the phenomenon of rhetoric. It can be very helpful to examine a text and identify the persuasive appeals (pathos, éthos, or logos) upon which it relies, before proceeding to identify metaphors, similes, and so forth; it is, however, necessary to do more than this, if a particular piece of rhetoric is to be fully contextualised and understood.

Without question, though, an awareness of classical schemes of rhetoric helps us interpret the language of latter-day imperialists. The empires of the twentieth century existed ‘in the shadow of Rome’ (and indeed Greece), and their rulers to a great extent operated in its rhetorical shade as well. As Barbara Goff has suggested, Classics was distinguished from other aspects of culture and literature ‘by its role in
Europe as the common coin of the educated metropolitan elite'. The relationship between empire and the classics shifted dynamically, in response both to geopolitical developments and the evolution of learning about the ancient world.

Nor was the British Empire unique in this respect. As Thomas David Dubois, a historian of Japan’s imperial ventures in China puts it, ‘Whether the West represented itself as the culmination of Christian destiny, the triumph of rational secularism, or the depths of modern decadence, it did so most clearly in light of the exotic spiritualism of the mysterious Orient.’ Italy’s fascist regime claimed to be building a new Roman empire in Africa, and invoked the symbols, ceremonies and civilizational values of imperial Rome in its efforts to garner domestic support for Mussolini’s colonial conquests. French imperial administrators in North Africa and the Syrian Levant also invested heavily in archaeological and other cultural projects that underscored the predominant influence of Latin civilization throughout the Mediterranean Basin. Unsurprisingly, the French case for Latin civilizational continuity drew heavily on the writings of Herodotus and Tacitus in relation to North Africa while overlooking the mass of Arabic literature revealing Oriental currents of transnational cultural implantation. In French Algeria much the same could be said for colonial administrators’ selective use of physical evidence such as Roman coins, irrigation systems and farming practices.

The Classics and the cultural heritage of classical civilizations had an impact on rhetoric in our period in two different ways. First, they provided a source of substantive arguments, in the form of a series of (contested and ever-changing) ‘lessons’ about the nature of the ‘civilizing mission’, and so on, and ‘warnings’ about the causes of imperial decline. Second, they provided a set of techniques and points of reference; the use of tags acting as a symbol of the status and education of the speaker. C.A. Hagerman has rightly cautioned against viewing the Classics solely in terms of how they were used to justify imperial and racial domination, but he too acknowledges the major contribution that they made to the imperialists’ ‘rhetorical arsenal’.

Andrew Thompson has rightly noted that ‘the terms “empire” and “imperialism” were like empty boxes that were continuously being filled up and emptied of their meanings.’ But although the contents could change, the shapes of the boxes were generally recognisable, even if they got knocked about over time. Familial and bodily metaphors (which, to be sure, were also widely applied in non-empire contexts) cropped up repeatedly. This was no accident but a reflection of their generic utility for those who sought to sustain imperial control. Rather like processes of remembering, which are dynamic and historically
contingent – less the calling forth of static memories from a mental
storehouse than the adaptation of recollections to correlate with the
imagined self of the individual concerned – so, too, our readings of the
rhetorical representation of empire and imperialism is shaped by our
changing views of the ideas involved. In their analysis of sharply diver-
gent Dutch and Indonesian memories of colonial domestic services
Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Stressler get to the essence of things:

Issues of ‘memory’ have played an increasingly prominent role in how
students of colonialism understand the relationship between the facts of
the colonial archive and ethnographically elicited historical knowledge,
between archival production and the politics of its consumption.73

Transferring this observation to the realm of imperial rhetoric, it is
worth reminding ourselves that such rhetoric formed part of this
colonial archive. Imperialist and anti-colonial rhetoric was, inevitably,
the product of its time. It needs to be approached as such if it is to be
understood historically.

We remarked earlier that rhetoric is a social phenomenon. We might
equally or better have said that it is a power phenomenon. If rhetoric is
simply a set of techniques of persuasion that can (potentially) be mas-
tered and deployed equally well by weak and strong alike then it offers
a level playing field to all comers: linguistic power, and hence access to
political power, are available to all who take the opportunity to learn
the right techniques. In truth, the linguistic resources available to any
given actor are heavily (although not absolutely) determined by his or
her place in relation to the prevailing social, political and economic
order. In other words, if rhetoric is defined as public language (informed
by private discourses) attempting to persuade, that persuasion does not
operate on rational free agents all of whom hold equal status. Public
speech – and the control of the spaces and technologies through which
it operates – is for the most part the preserve of the socially and politi-
cally privileged. It is the lot of the vulnerable and marginalized, by
contrast, either to be talked at or dragooned into mimicking the jargon
of those who hold sway over them. This is not to exclude the possibil-
ity of subaltern resistance – after all, empires fall – but this generally
takes place on linguistic terrain chosen, in the first place at least, by
those who dominate.

To put it another way, no matter how much one opposes the exist-
ing order, it is impossible not to be influenced by its rhetorical conven-
tions: would-be resisters must argue within them even as they seek
to overturn the structures that support or give rise to them. This has
methodological implications for historians. Acknowledging that the
writing of history has its own rhetorics, conventions and dominant
linguistic forms is an essential starting point. At the same time we need to be constantly on guard against merely reproducing, rather than challenging and analysing, the unspoken assumptions of the historical actors about whom we write. That offers a route, perhaps, to challenging our present-day assumptions too. Many historians now rightly emphasize the links and continuities between empire and post-empire; we need also to recognize links between imperial rhetorics and the rhetorics of humanitarianism and interventionism that are widely considered to have replaced them.

To draw attention to this is not necessarily to condemn these languages or the policies they are used to defend. But if we want to understand why some oppressive, post-imperial regimes (such as, for example, that of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe) have successfully mobilized and exploited anti-colonial rhetoric long after formal empire ended, we need to appreciate the ways in which today’s seemingly benign rhetorics of ‘international community’ may carry profoundly alienating connotations for some audiences. Empire may be over, but its rhetorical legacy is still being perpetuated – sometimes inadvertently, sometimes not.

Notes
9 Ibid., pp. 499–503. Significantly, the BBC Arabic language service broadcast over thirty hours per week in the early 1950s. At the same time, their French equivalent
as well as the Voice of America Arabic service each transmitted between three to four hours of Arabic programming.


13 As MacKenzie tellingly puts it, ‘Heroic reputations therefore have a tendency to be equally ephemeral, perhaps doomed to be replaced by the heroes of opposition and resistance that help to bring empires down.’ In John M. MacKenzie, ‘Afterword’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42:5 (2014), pp. 970–3, quote at p. 973.


20 Elizabeth Buettner, introduction to *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016].


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41 ‘Lord Carnarvon on Imperial Administration’, Saturday Review, 9 November 1878.


44 ‘Mr Chamberlain in the City’, The Times, 20 January 1904.


49 Hobson, Imperialism, p. 207.

50 Ibid., p. 166.

51 A helpful taxonomy of the varying uses of the word ‘discourse’ can be found in Anne Wichmann, ‘Discourse Intonation’, Covenant Journal of Language Studies, 2:1 (June, 2014), pp. 1–16.


57 See, for example, Judi Atkins, Alan Finlayson, James Martin and Nick Turnbull [eds], Rhetoric in British Politics and Society (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

58 The long history of rebels’ rhetorical appropriation emerges in Patrick Lantschner, ‘Revolts and the Political Order of Cities in the Late Middle Ages’, Past & Present, 225 (2014), pp. 11–12.


A foundational text (albeit, arguably, it actually underplays Rome’s significance) is Raymond F. Betts, ‘The Allusion to Rome in British Imperialist Thought of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, *Victorian Studies*, 15:2 [1971], pp. 149–59.


