

Short, John Phillip. *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. 232 pp. with illustrations, index, bibliography. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5094-5. \$39.95 (hardcover).

German colonialists often bemoaned the “colonial weariness” that afflicted their compatriots. Many worried that the colonial movement’s propaganda work could not engage the masses, distracted as they were by the charms of mass culture and the poisons of anti-patriotic propaganda. And yet, in the last decade before 1914, the political winds seemed to be blowing in colonialists’ direction. The 1907 “Hottentot elections” – fought largely over support for Germany’s war in Southwest Africa – strengthened the position of patriotic parties and encouraged socialists and other critics to cultivate a more pro-colonial stance. How do we make sense of this apparent contradiction between supposedly indifferent masses and a growing colonialist consensus? Generations of scholars have followed the “social imperialism” thesis, which suggests that elites constructed, more or less successfully, a mirage of national purpose overseas to distract the restive masses from domestic tensions. More recently, scholars have examined colonialism as something more than mere distraction, as something that fundamentally shaped German society. But many of these studies also address colonialism as a fundamentally integrative force that produced a national vision meant to transcend domestic social divisions.

In *Magic Lantern Empire*, John Phillip Short challenges this approach. At the center of his story are the educated and propertied elites of the organized colonial movement, whose propaganda and enjoyment of spectacular entertainments brought them into increasing proximity with members of the lower classes. These men struggled with how to reach across the class divide while still maintaining their own position of privilege. Their imperfect solution was to enforce a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate modes of engaging with colonialism. On the one hand they valorized their own scientific “enlightenment,” a rational ordering of the world around a global political economy wedded to commodity capitalism. On the other, they derided the commercial “enchantment” that drew the supposedly irrational masses. But in practice these were actually overlapping categories, two sides of the same coin that existed in necessary tension with one another.

Over the course of the book it becomes apparent that the contradiction between apparently indifferent masses and a colonialist consensus is crucial for understanding the workings of colonialism in German society. Colonialists produced “the masses” as distant, irrational, and dependent in order to erase the logical flaws in their own arguments for colonial modernity, to authorize their enjoyment of mass culture, and to establish their position as a rational and privileged elite. But lower-class Germans were actively interested in colonialism in ways that colonialists gave them little credit for and could not contain. Most were similarly drawn to exoticized pleasures, but many, including colonial opponents, also appropriated the enlightenment on offer in the name of scientific objectivity and modern progress. In this way, Short argues, colonialism divided the nation by reproducing class boundaries that were being eroded by mass politics and mass culture. At the same time, a new consensus developed out of these tensions, a consensus not around visions of the nation but rather around visions of the global.

This compact book is well-organized. Short begins by surveying the elitist structures of the colonial movement and explains colonialists’ focus on commodities. He then moves on to “subaltern colonialisms,” alternative forms of popular activism that ran counter to the priorities

laid down by colonialist leaders. From here Short explores colonialists' ambivalent embrace of mass culture's enchantments and working class readers' surprising enthusiasm for colonial enlightenment. Finally, he examines the 1907 elections to illustrate both the growing consensus around a colonial political economy and the persistence of strident anti-colonialist alternatives among socialist activists at the grassroots.

Short contextualizes the organized colonial movement more effectively than any other scholar, treating colonialists not as an atavistic force but rather as active and sometimes creative players in a very fluid environment. He also demonstrates the importance of taking seriously other strains of colonial activism and interest. Bringing lower-class Germans into the story as agents allows him to present colonialism as a field of tension, a site for competing publics to produce and contest the social order. Finally, integrating mass culture into his analysis of social and political developments allows him to point out the flights of fancy, the enchantments, embedded throughout the colonial public sphere, as in the bourgeois public sphere more generally.

Let me raise one question. Does Short's focus on class push him to overlook other social divisions that might complicate the consensus around a market-based modernity. Religion, for example, is a constant background presence here, whether in the form of Center Party critiques of colonialism or the integration of missionary organizations into the colonial movement. Yet religion could cut across class. More to the point, it also activated different tensions and provoked different responses to the problems of modernity both at home and overseas.

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