

Book Review: Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times by Ann Laura Stoler

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2017/04/05/book-review-duress-imperial-durabilities-in-our-times-by-ann-laura-stoler/

2017-4-5

*How do colonial histories remain active forces shaping the conditions and most urgent issues of the present? In **Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times**, Ann Laura Stoler utilises 'duress' as a category of domination as the prism through which to analysis how imperial traces continue to impact on relations of exploitation in the contemporary moment. Ed Jones praises this book as a refreshing and deeply creative interpretation of modern politics that will offer a laboratory of ideas to readers.*

***Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times*. Ann Laura Stoler. Duke University Press. 2016.**

Find this book: 

Duress: Imperial Durabilities In Our Times is a timely book. It can be read as both a work of postcolonial analysis and a methodological guide to conceptual history. Ann Laura Stoler's willingness to wrestle uneasy mercurial modern terminologies into valuable approaches to the histories of imperial formations is refreshing and exemplary.

Modern political discourse is inflected by threats and nostalgia: on the left and on the right, values appear under assault and facile apocalyptic defeatism obfuscates further debate. Stoler's emphasis on the term 'duress' as a historical category of domination that looms over contemporary power dynamics is therefore a valuable contribution to the conceptual vocabulary of today's politics. While other authors might struggle with the ambivalence of the term, Stoler exploits the elusive nature of 'duress' in order to rummage through the ruins of what modernity has deemed untimely.

For Stoler, duress is 'a relation to a condition, a pressure exerted, a troubled condition [...] it may manifest in a weakened constitution and attenuated capacity to bear its weight'. In the context of postcolonial studies, then, duress 'is a relationship of actualized and anticipated violence', pointing the reader towards a more subtle observation throughout the work: the threat of violence as a form of lingering power. A consistently able use of this term allows Stoler to take a point that has obsessed many historians further than most of the existing scholarship: historicised understandings of imperial sovereignty are better equipped than ideas of nation states to explain contemporary forms of exploitation and manifestations of resentment.

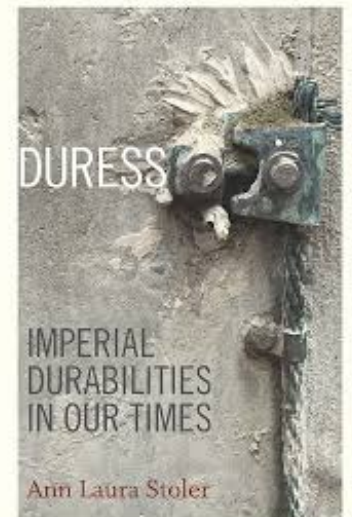




Image Credit: (Piervincenzo Madeo CC BY 2.0)

In her introduction, Stoler sees the exploration of duress as a way of mapping forms of occlusion – or the hidden – in traditional histories of empire, in order to address often invisible, overturned or neglected perspectives as the imperial origins of state dynamics and international relations are brought to the surface. Chapter Two deals with the failure to use the rhetoric of empire in discussions about Palestine. Chapters Three and Four constitute an assessment of the forgotten practice of punishment through colony-formation and the omission of discussions around this and other colonial practices from French history. Chapter Five explores the banality of modern uses of terms such as ‘benevolent empire’ and expands on the importance of using a historicised model of imperial sovereignty. Chapter Six pushes the Enlightenment links between knowledge and ideas of empire past the frontiers of the beginning of the nineteenth century to show how insecurity about the nature of information remains a central weakness in the modern state apparatus. Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine address the ways in which latent racism lies at the core of the modern idea of the French state and therefore appears to many as ‘common sense’. If this manifests itself politically today in the effervescent popularity of the Front National in France, it remains generally neglected in public discussion. Stoler uses her acute understanding of French politics and history in several chapters to show how her concepts can help us understand the woodwork supporting today’s political pillars.

Perhaps Stoler’s most outstanding contribution is her ability to show how much the notion of ‘newness’ – the idea that the leading conditions behind modern phenomena lack historical precedents – influences academic and public discussion of today’s problems. Scholars have argued this point at length: [Antony Anghie](#) suggests twentieth-century sovereignty was created ‘and improvised’ out of the colonial encounter, while [Linda Gregerson](#) portrays the formation of the nation as part of the retroactive logic of empire. But Stoler has managed to show how temporality – or rather the ‘uneven temporal sedimentation’ of empire – provides us with precedents that give a better historical context for addressing the problems of our time: waste lands, toxic dumping and the formation of ghettos are all the result of the logic of empire. In stark contrast with the liberal idea of the state, this logic relies on the threat of violence and porous borders of sovereignty to define rights.

Just how pertinent this logic is can be seen in the transferability of Stoler’s book to the most problematic political dimensions of 2017. Stoler’s discussion of nineteenth-century agricultural colonies as spaces that reveal how ‘being at risk and a risk is a fuzzier political line than most colonial stories would allow’ provides a precedent for today’s refugee camps. The common reading of the inequalities brought about by the economic crisis of 2008 as divided between the risk-makers who have the resources to shelter themselves from the risk they create and those who can

only suffer through them is understood as reproducing the logic of empire, whereby nations 'operate as states of exception that vigilantly produce exceptions to their principles and exemptions to their laws'. Hannah Arendt's idea that imperial formations give rise to a 'wild confusion of historical terminology' can be best understood when considering the transformation of contested space and the problematic definitions of sovereignty in the face of historical contingency: 'what happens to the threshold of transformation when unfinished development projects are put to other use [...] when Soviet military camps are abandoned and remade as the Ukrainian-Polish borderlands?'

Book reviewers often attempt to review the book they wish the author had written. Throughout this work, Stoler demonstrates her understanding of the criteria behind today's historiography – exemplified by her awareness of how and why both Michel Foucault and Edward Said's contributions to the discussion on Palestine went largely ignored due to the political thorniness of the issue. If Stoler spends time engaging with the ways in which today's perceptions have been shaped, this reader cannot help but wish more emphasis had gone into the historical formation of different ideas of imperial sovereignty themselves. The chapters that assess modern political discourse often suffer from an overreliance on a singular historical theory of imperial sovereignty that would benefit from more nuanced national contextualisation. This difference in opinion is merely one of emphasis. Nonetheless, *Duress* provides a great laboratory of ideas for scholars and for a public willing to engage with a deeply creative interpretation of modern politics.

Ed Jones is a graduate of the LSE and a PhD Candidate in History at the University of Cambridge, with a focus on early modern Spain. [Read more by Ed Jones.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books