

“India has an extraordinary collection of cities which form a key part of the story of British colonialism” – Tristram Hunt MP

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/12/20/india-has-an-extraordinary-collection-of-cities-which-form-a-key-part-of-the-story-of-british-colonialism-tristram-hunt-mp/

2016-12-20

On 23 November **Dr Tristram Hunt MP** visited LSE to speak as part of the new South Asia Centre series *Colony as Empire: Histories from Whitehall*. He discussed his book *Ten Cities that Made an Empire*, with a particular focus on Calcutta, Bombay and New Delhi. Afterwards he spoke to **Sonali Campion** about the significance of these Indian cities in the story of the British Empire, and how his research informs his outlook as a politician.



SC: Three of your ten cities are in India, which is the highest concentration in one country. Why is that, and what specific lens do you think each of those cities brings to the story?

TH: India has this extraordinary collection of incredible colonial cities. It was obviously a crucial component of the British Empire and such a large part of the story of British colonialism. It was always going to feature heavily because you just have this embarrassment of riches.

The purpose of the book is for each city to tell a different story of Empire. Calcutta tells the story of the East India Company, the riches of Bengal and the beginnings of the really big commercial footprint of the British in India. It's the story of trade but also the beginnings of territorial conquest, when Richard Wellesley arrives with a kind of neo-Roman idea of empire. Bombay is the story of global trade flows and commercialism and industrialism – it's the first industrial city I write about. Bombay is a Manchester or Birmingham and you see this in the extraordinary civic architecture, so that's a story of modernity. Then New Delhi is the high point of empire, it's the hubris, the culmination. In urban planning terms it is this incredible mix of the *Garden City* movement and the genius of Sir Edward Lutyens, the British architect who played a pivotal role in designing and building the new imperial capital.

You describe in your introduction that Britain's imperial cities today play a more significant role in world affairs than those of other empires. Did you get a sense from your research of why that is?

When you look at the history of these cities, many of them are port cities and trading cities. The story of imperialism is partly the story of modernity and trade flows, so in the 21st century much of that commercial mercantile trading infrastructure is proving incredibly successful for cities like Mumbai, Singapore, Dubai or Hong Kong. I think that commercial element of British imperialism has given an infrastructure and a human social civic capital to some of these cities, which they are drawing down on and utilising today.



The Hon. Dr Tristram Hunt MP speaking at the South Asia Centre. Credit: Sonali Campion

Why is colonialism absent from the British school curriculum, and is that not a problem?

It's a terrible problem. On the one hand there's a leftist cringe about empire, so we have avoided going near it, and on the other hand there is a kind of writer's triumphalism about it, which means it not particularly interesting to teach. Thankfully, the new history curriculum – around which there was some controversy – has some very powerful sections on Britain and the world and the Mughal Empire and colonialism. We are getting better at teaching the story of the slave trade, in the aftermath of the bicentenary in 2007. So I no longer see the challenge as curriculum change, I see it as teacher training, and teaching aids. Because once you have a good teacher training programme then your going to be able to inspire more people to study the imperial past.

You talked about the good and bad “cul-de-sac” when it comes to writing about the British Empire – how do we get beyond that?

Academia has an incredibly sophisticated approach to this past, it is how we then translate that into public discourse. It is moving and I think the [High Court cases](#) relating to human rights abuses have been very powerful in that. But we have a way to go before we get to that richer understanding. We have that story of adaptation, interaction and exchange, but I also always caution against eliminating the violence from empire. This was also undeniably a story of dominance and racism and colonisation and violence. That cannot be separated out of it.

You talked about the flipped relationship between Liverpool and Shanghai, which China today investing heavily in the former British imperial trade hub. How much does your research influence the way you think about the UK's international relations today, particularly with respect to India?

It does feed in. 150 years ago Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales was making the steel that created the railway infrastructure in India, and now Tata is making decisions about the future steel industry in Wales. Thinking about the to-and-fro East and West between India and Britain and getting it in to British politicians' heads the British footprint was not the be-all and end-all of Indian culture and civilisation is enormously important in developing a sophisticated outlook on the relationship today. The history does inform me, and the story of education and cultural connections between Britain and India are so important. So directly in terms of public policy that means we need to keep struggling to try and get students taken out of migration figures and value our university and higher education links.

Listen to the podcast of Dr Tristram Hunt MP's talk at the South Asia Centre [here](#).

The South Asia Centre [Colony as Empire](#) series continues in 2017. Details for upcoming events are available [here](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

Dr Tristram Hunt, MP is an intellectual and cultural historian specialising in urban pasts. He is Senior Lecturer in modern British history at Queen Mary University of London, and Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central. He is the author of [Ten Cities that made an Empire](#) (2014).



Sonali Champion is Communications and Events Officer at the South Asia Centre. She holds a BA (Hons) in History from the University of Oxford and completed her MSc in Comparative Politics at LSE. She tweets [@sonalijcampion](#).



- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics