

THE NEW REPUBLIC



Imperial Illusions

Don't use me as a straw man, Professor Sen!

Niall Ferguson, The New Republic Published: Friday, February 15, 2008

Dear Sir,

I cannot let Amartya Sen's otherwise enjoyable piece ("[Imperial Illusions](#)", December 31) pass without a protest at his misuse of me as a straw man. Professor Sen may find *Empire* "rather didactic". He may even be justified in calling it "a guarded but enthusiastic celebration of British imperialism." But it is a complete misrepresentation to imply, as he does, that I have argued anywhere that "Americans [should] be inspired by ... early British rule in India". On the contrary, the first chapter of my book *Empire* pulls no punches in its account of Clive's role. Indeed, Professor Sen's account and my account of the era of Company rule have a strikingly large amount in common, though for some reason he does not acknowledge it.

Throughout *Empire*, I make it clear that I am on the side of Adam Smith, not Robert Clive. The British Empire (as opposed to "imperialism", a term of abuse) was only benign in so far as it promoted free trade, free migration and free capital mobility. It did not do those things until the mid-nineteenth century. Only then is it possible to speak of a "liberal empire." Only that empire offers any lessons for present-day America.

I quite agree, and have said myself, that any assessment of the costs and benefits of British rule in India needs to make the counterfactual(s) explicit. No one claims India would have stood still if there had been no 1757. With all due respect, however, Professor Sen's counterfactual of "Meiji India" lacks plausibility. Though I have often heard it argued, the notion seems to me utterly far-fetched that India could have adopted the Japanese route to economic and political modernization. (One might as well say, to take a European example, that Russia could have adopted the English route if only Peter the Great had read John Locke). Japan and India had scarcely anything in common. The proper comparison is surely between Mughal India and Qing China, which (with a few exceptions) was not subject to direct European rule, or between Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey. Do I need to point out that their economic performance was, if anything, worse than that of India in the period of British direct rule (1857-1947)? As for the Bengal famine of 1943, cited by Professor Sen as evidence of British misrule, he omits to mention that this was a direct result of the attack on Burma by that paragon of non-imperial modernization ... Japan.

Professor Sen is an exceedingly distinguished economist. But if there were such a thing as a Nobel Prize for history, I am afraid he would not win it.

Yours,

Niall Ferguson
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Read Amartya Sen's response [here](#).

Niall Ferguson is the Laurence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University and is author, most recently, of [The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West](#).

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