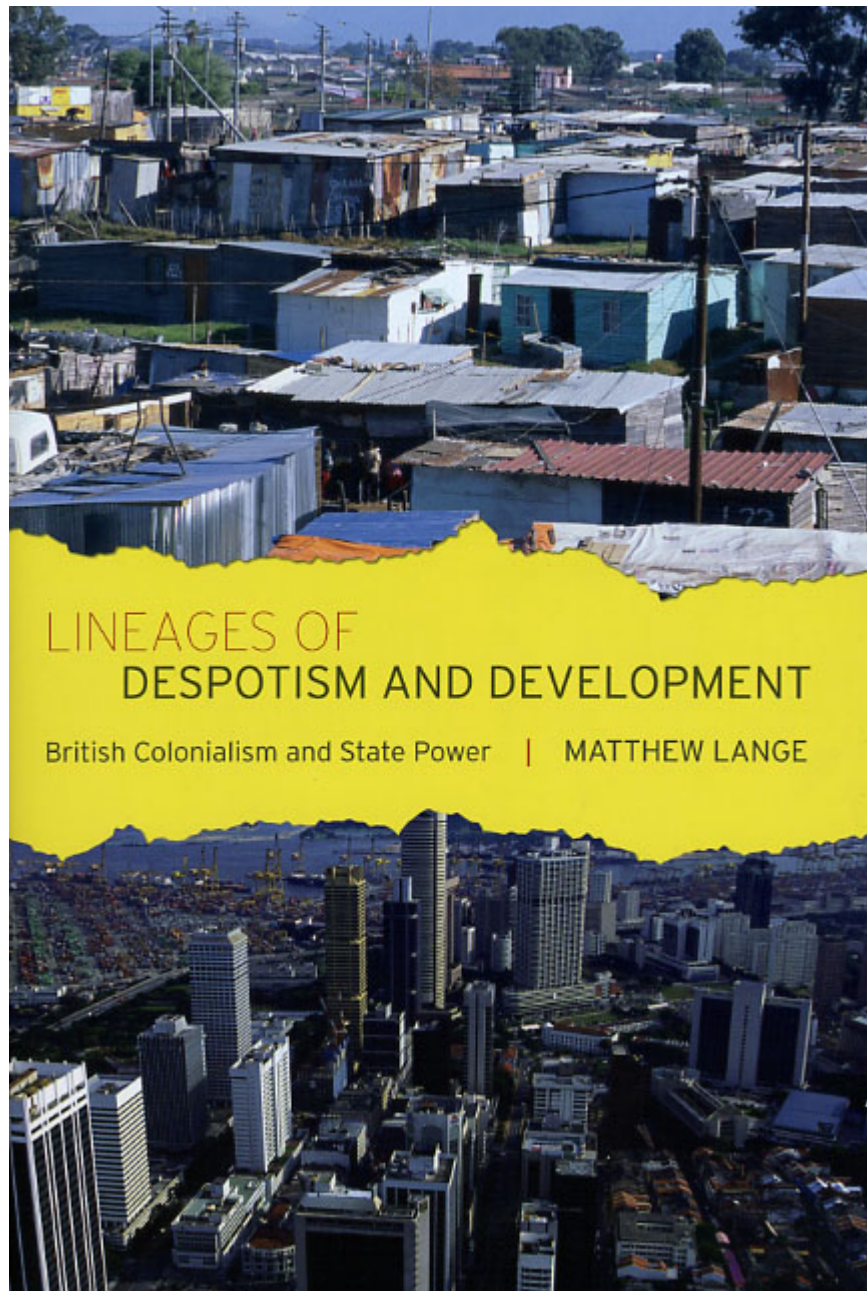


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Lineages of Despotism and Development: British Colonialism and State Power



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Reviewed Work(s)

Lineages of Despotism and Development: British Colonialism and State Power. By Matthew Lange (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Pp. 260. Cloth, \$45.00.

Matthew Lange's work seeks to assess the long-term impact of British imperial rule on its diverse colonies resulting. His analysis centers on a

binary of politico-economic failure or success, as developed through markers of material success, levels of education and health, and strength of representative democratic institutions. Such a focus works to develop a quantitative and easily comparable methodology for surveying the current conditions and future prospects of diverse post-colonial regions. He explores a wide variety of British imperial and native conditions but ultimately frames his analysis around a more direct contrast. Lange argues that direct British imperial rule was beneficial to the colonized, that it accounted generally for prosperity in and following the empire. Similarly, he maintains that indirect rule by Britain produced underdevelopment, inefficiency, corruption, and erosion of state utility. Employing both quantitative and qualitative forms of analysis, Lange posits the primacy of colonial influence. He indicates awareness of diversity in pre- and post-colonial factors but classifies them as secondary compared to the form taken by British power (3-4).

Lange uses most of his text to analyze cases that fit the 'normal legacy' as well as those that situate the 'abnormal'. He briefly explores the applicability of his paradigm in the larger British Empire and even to other European empires. This work, however, predominantly utilizes a narrow focus, focusing a chapter each on the colonies of Sierra Leone, Botswana, Mauritius, and Guyana. The book provides an incomprehensive look at the larger empire, with India receiving only four pages. The main focus is on the above extended case studies as a medium to validate Lange's central thesis. He situates Sierra Leone as a typical example, demonstrating indirect British rule in the colonial period, resulting in low development for the colony after independence. Lange associates indirect British dominance with the use of indigenous collaborators, which in turn promoted privilege and corruption (32). In contrast to the development that can emerge from firmer Western rule, colonialism with greater native influence reinforces tradition and chieftdom oppression. In the context of Sierra Leone, Lange argues that "colonial rule created a non-bureaucratic, infrastructurally weak, and non-inclusive state that not only failed to promote development but instead actively obstructed it" (92). This trait manifested itself in an inefficient and oppressive state with long-lasting consequences.

Lange employs Mauritius as another representative example, in this case showing higher development because of direct British rule. Lange finds

that such control facilitated the prominence of effective legal and administrative techniques, leading to greater bureaucracy and stronger unity (39). This tendency weakened hierarchy and inequality in Mauritian society, helping to promote organization and independence by subordinate individuals (75). Such development was ambiguous and partial over an extended period, due to inconsistent state benefits (90). Nevertheless, the larger association emerges strongly in this account, with direct control promoting the rule of law, a vigorous civil society, and reduced hierarchical abuses (36). “Although Mauritian society was among the most hierarchical and unequal in the world in the early 1800s, these conditions weakened over a short period of time because of growing colonial support of the working classes” (75). If the effects of such policies were dramatic, for Lange the understanding of them emerges with particular force in contrast to the fate of indirectly ruled colonies.

Lange also identifies and seeks to explain a number of colonies that do not suit his model as directly as Sierra Leone and Mauritius, assessing and contextualizing two ‘abnormal’ cases. As he concedes, Botswana shows a legacy of indirect rule but medium development, not presenting manifest failure in the same way as Sierra Leone. Similarly, he identifies Guyana as having direct British rule but only medium development, rather than the higher progress predicted by his template. In both cases Lange explores the weight of influential factors such as American involvement, partisan conflict and deviations from the norm during the independence process. His account indicates ways in which such factors make a profound influence, even as he attempts to salvage the strength of his dominant binary. *Lineages of Despotism and Development* retains its main finding, arguing for the primary influence of the manner of British colonial rule. While Lange acknowledges many ambiguities and half-cases, he maintains belief in the basic binary of direct and indirect rule as a meaningful technique for organizing data. He places main agency in the hands of British colonial officials, writing: “In particular, if they had decided to rule more directly, the inhabitants of former British colonies would likely be better able to pursue their well-being today” (206).

While competent in the basic identification of diverse issues, Lange’s approach is inherently problematic and makes a number of awkward assumptions. Lange defines a range of societies in a simplistic binary of success or failure, and attributes the most significant legacy to the fact of

British power and whether it qualified as direct or indirect. The methodology used to measure a former colony's success or failure involves a combination of GDP, infant mortality, presence or absence of democracy, level of average education, and standards of governance as dependent variables (45). These apparently firm criteria for analysis leave a number of major assumptions unchallenged and assign categories with an overly simplistic base of standards. Colonial conditions emerge with considerable variety, but they are framed by the assertion that they are moving either towards or away from a monolithic Western stance of egalitarian prosperity. There is insufficient attention given to the nuances of such a model, the way it could be less than wholly appropriate for former colonial societies, or the way power continues to operate through patterns of trade and politics. Lange is fairly positive on the account of British imperialism, identifying British weak control as the most problematic form. Similarly, he emphasizes how unusual it was for the British to overturn the democratic process and attributes eventual resistance and independence against Britain as a demonstration of their productive methodology. This stance threatens to misrepresent the contrast in quantitative data and the techniques used for evaluating them, as well as bringing into question the structural components of the study.

Lange's main historiographical focus is to invert the normal assumption that British indirect control was better for long-term colonial prospects. He consciously situates himself as a middle ground between Niall Ferguson and Mike Davis. Rather than a total endorsement or complete rejection of British imperialism, he claims a moderate stance of contextualizing it. Lange's book has value in a fresh exploration of a politically charged issue, with the distinctions he identifies between direct and indirect rule and the paradoxical long-term results of these interesting questions for the development of post-colonial analysis. However, this work blinds itself to much of the recent historiography that has problematized precisely the stark developmental presumption that underlies Lange's conclusions. In failing to engage with the ways Western knowledge patterns have been compromised by and entangled with the exertion of power, Lange provides an overall assessment that is deeply problematic in its assertion of simple cause and effect. This work might have benefited from wider exploration beyond the quantitative sociology of imperialism, studying in the manner of Antoinette Burton

or Bernard Cohn how the 'objective' texts of surveying empire connected to racialized and culturally hegemonic forms of colonial rule.[1] Lange delves into rich information stores in the process of quantification yet replicates a basically colonial view of the society. Amidst the array of quantitative precision, Lange makes broad and unsupported assumptions. The most fundamental problem is the assumption of methods of census and societal survey as detached, unambiguous applied criteria. His writing acts in totality so as to obscure the wider legacy of British imperialism while ostensibly delivering a clearer understanding of it.

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[1] See in particular Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).



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