New Delhi: The last imperial city


A great deal of interesting archival material and some new historical contextualisations are brought to light in this study of the building of New Delhi (1911–ca. 1931) as capital of the British Raj. The book is at its best when addressing the broader political geographical context (the reformulation of provinces after 1911 and Delhi’s position within ongoing processes of devolution), the vicious debate over the financial logic behind the capital’s funding, and the mechanisms through which land was acquired upon which to build the city. But this material is thwarted by three faults that hinder the development of the analysis. The first is theoretical, the second is historiographical and the third is political: the three taken together serve to create a misleading theoretical apparatus that unfortunately fails to liberate the author from the liberal imperial mindset he attempts to critique.

First, theory. Johnson tells us he will be using Gramsci to expose New Delhi as a site of consent as much as of coercion. However, we actually get little on what Gramsci brings to the table, and nothing on the long and distinguished line of South Asian thinking on Gramsci, from the subaltern collective through to current debates on a postcolonial Gramsci. What we do get is a vague appeal to historical materialism, because it deals with “why” questions, unlike the “hows” or “whats” of discourse analyse. This leads us to some references to Britain’s World System and to Cain and Hopkins (a co-editor of the book series of which this forms a part) on gentlemanly capitalism. The latter’s influence does emerge in the excellent chapter on imperial revenues, which is one of the highlights of the book. But elsewhere, the more recurrent appeals are to theories that could not really be called Gramscian, even if the authors have dabbled with Gramsci in the past, and which lean much more towards the discourse analysis against which the author erects his historico-materialist defences. The introductory chapter is titled “Seeing Like a (Colonial) State,” in reference to one of James Scott’s more Foucauldian works, while Barry Hindess’ work on liberal “unfreedom,” based on Foucault, is cited in an attempt to fathom the question of colonial (il)liberalism.
Second, historiography. This is perhaps the worst and the most self-conscious fault. There is a strong tradition of trans-disciplinary writing on New Delhi (I should say that I come out quite well) which is briefly noted but dismissed because it supposedly interprets New Delhi as “coercive” while Johnson explores it as a site for manufacturing consent. This must be a wilful misrepresentation of an often stunning body of work: Robert Irving highlights in brilliant detail the machinations circulating around the capital’s design that played precisely on the issues of coercion, consent and liberalism; Anthony King’s ground-breaking analysis of the socio-spatial hierarchies of accommodation showed exactly how the landscape worked to insinuate the attempts to produce complicity into the bungalows and quarters of the city; while Thomas Metcalf showed precisely how the ideologies of the Raj attempted to produce subjects of rule. Johnson mistakes the lack of the words “consent,” “coercion” or “illiberalism” in these books to mean that these concepts are not studied. He is wrong. Other bodies of work are likewise misrepresented. Not only did the subaltern collective not, apparently, use Gramsci, they also failed to study the liberal imperial project and its attempts at conciliation (a constant theme from Ranajit Guha’s first book to Partha Chatterjee’s most recent) and focused on the local at the expense of the world system (bang goes Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*).

Third, politics. Perhaps because of the above, Johnson struggles to negotiate the representational minefield of imperial history. The book is shot through with, at best, unfortunately careless remarks that align the author with many of the imperial liberals (or autocrats, depending on one’s perspective) about which he writes. We learn that “the new capital symbolized Britain’s absolute authority over India’s political evolution” (9) and that the city “encouraged Indians, by offering political reforms, to discipline themselves as more loyal colonial subjects” (12) after which colonial subjects “willingly consented to their colonial dependence” (12). Sanskrit scholars like William Jones are said to have shown us that Britain and India “shared a long past” (10). Viceroy Hardinge, perhaps the leading figure behind the move, is described as a man of intellect and art (19), a “philosopher-King” (110), and a talented and able statesman (134). This was not an opinion shared by the “revolutionaries” who nearly succeeded in assassinating Hardinge on his entry into Delhi in 1912, and who certainly would not have agreed that George V’s 1911 Durbar proclamation gave the government “morality
and purpose” (42). This is a great shame as there is material of significant interest within this book regarding British awareness of the tensions of liberal empire, such as the House of Lords debate over the whether the King-Emperor’s decision to relocate the capital was actually constitutional, or the red-hot debates about the degree of permissible reform and their economic consequences.

It is perhaps telling that the most exciting and successful parts of the book address the context for the capital shift, but not the city itself. Whilst the chapters on New Delhi’s design contain reworkings of familiar themes (the Lutyens vs. Baker controversy, race and class in the city) and extensive sections on relatively minor figures like the architect Sir Bradford Leslie, these are perked up by genuinely interesting links to debates on the rule of law and land in India and the nascent movement towards federalism. In this sense, the book sits much more comfortably amidst the Cambridge School of imperial history (with all the benefits of its world scope and the negatives outlined in the subalternist critique) than it does amidst the revolutionary tomes of historical materialism, or the rich seam of urban historical writing upon which its research is based.

Stephen Legg
University of Nottingham