TO: Members of the Georgia Seminar

From: Jack P. Greene

The paper I am offering represents the first-draft of Chapter Four of a six-chapter book called SPEAKING OF EMPIRE: Subtitles I have been considering include Assessments of Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Colonialism Celebrated and Challenged, Coming to Terms with Colonialism, Facing Up to Colonialism, Perceptions of Colonialism, and the Analysis of Colonialism.

As these various subtitles suggest, the volume looks at the question of how British people in Britain--that is, England and Scotland--spoke about, thought about, and evaluated overseas empire roughly from the Glorious Revolution into the late eighteenth century. Recently, scholars including Linda Colley, Kathleen Wilson, and Eliga Gould have emphasized the extent to which after 1740 metropolitan Britons came to identify themselves as an imperial people, and they have begun to unpack precisely what membership in the empire represented to those who stayed at home. In general, the emphasis in this new literature has been on the celebration of empire, an emphasis that also characterizes the first two chapters of my book. My principal goal, however, is to focus attention upon the extent to which the celebration of empire was paralleled, especially after 1760, by a simultaneous revulsion on the part of metropolitan Britons against the behavior of many Britons overseas and a growing effort to distance themselves from such behavior. This impulse will be the subject of the last four chapters of the book. Why, after decades of ignoring the many transgressions of empire, metropolitan Britons would suddenly subject those transgressions to systematic scrutiny and what that critique meant for their engagement with empire are the central and animating questions of my project.
The chapters, Prologue, and Epilogue, are based upon two kinds of sources: (1) printed treatises, polemical pieces, and belletristic productions that deal with the nature of the wider imperial world upon Britain and (2) debates in parliament. The emphasis is upon how the authors of these works and parliamentary spokesmen represented empire and, more specifically upon the multiple languages they used when speaking of empire. The Table of Contents below will provide a guide to the overall structure of the volume.
The Prologue uses the debate over the Carib War in St. Vincent, which gave rise to one of the few explicit British condemnations of the colonizing process with its expropriation of native lands and destruction of native cultures, as a device for introducing the reader to the principal languages of empire employed in metropolitan Britain during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Chapter One argues that before the 1760s the language of commerce and its correlate, the language of civility, were the principal languages associated with the evaluation of overseas empire. Largely celebratory, the language of commerce emphasized the economic benefits of empire, arising from colonial expansion, colonial productions, colonial trade, and other overseas trades to Africa (in slaves) and India.

Chapter Two argues that the extraordinary British victories during the later stages of the Seven Years’ War gave rise to a new emphasis upon an ancient association of empire
with national greatness as Britons more and more began to use the language of imperialism when speaking of empire. Increasingly, empire came to be valued, not just for its commercial benefits, but for its contribution to national maritime and military strength. The chapter explores the importance of the language of imperialism in determining metropolitan attitudes toward colonial resistance during the crucial debates of the 1760s, 1770s, and early 1780s and illustrates the deep tensions between that language and the still powerful language of commerce in the debate over how Britain should respond to that resistance.

Chapter Three: Outposts of Loose Vagrant People: The Language of Otherness and the Evaluation of Britons Overseas

[Chapter Three explores, through a variety of discursive literatures, the old metropolitan heritage of regarding colonials as a kind of other, the refuse or the fanatics of Britain whose lack of cultivation condemned them to fall short of being fully British.]

Chapter Four: Arenas of Asiatic Plunder: The Language of Humanity and the Assessment of Eastern Empire

Chapter Four looks at the extensive debate, starting in the late 1760s, over the behavior of East India Company servants in India and the emergence of the nabob as the epitome of the Briton corrupted by the lack of social restraints in the overseas empire, capable of the most dastardly acts of cruelty and social destruction in the drive for gain. It illustrates how critics of nabob behavior employed the language of humanity to call into question the justice and nature of British imperial activities in the east.

Chapter Five: Sites of Creole Despotism: The Language of Humanity and the Mounting Critique of Colonial Slavery
Chapter Five represents an extension of the criticism of the behavior of Britons overseas by those people who, using the language of humanity, mounted an increasingly powerful attack upon the slave trade and the injustice and murderous character of plantation slavery in Britain’s American colonies. Beginning in the wake of the debates over India, the antislavery movement began slowly with a few pamphlets but gained enormous strength during the 1780s as creole despots took their place alongside Asiatic plunderers as emblems of denunciation in the late eighteenth-century empire.

Chapter Six: A Sink of Hibernian Oppression: The Language of Humanity and the Emerging Critique of Religious Persecution in Ireland

Chapter Six examines metropolitan British concerns about a series of misbehaviors by the dominant, colonizing Protestant establishment, including the high rate of absenteeism among landlords and their complicity in the creation of a vast pool of pensions that could be used as a vehicle of corruption by British ministerial leaders. Before the mid-1770s, however, British commentators on Ireland and the empire and parliamentary speakers largely ignored the major transgression of the Irish colonizers: the systematic discrimination against the numerically superior Catholic population. The silence on this question is deafening. Only in the mid- to late 1770s did a few London publications and the occasional parliamentary speaker begin, again in the name of humanity and justice, to call attention to this problem.

Epilogue: The British Empire: Sphere of Humanity or Inhumanity?
The Epilogue will review the findings of the volume at large, emphasize the role of the language of humanity in producing a critique of empire beginning in the late 1760s, and speculate on why, after decades of ignoring the underside of empire, various commentators took it up with such a vengeance in the quarter century following the Treaty of Paris of 1763.