

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.

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Prologue: “Scene of a Foul Transaction”: The Languages of Empire  
and The Carib War in St. Vincent

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: “The Principal Cornucopia of Great-Britain’s Wealth”:  
The Language of Commerce and the Celebration  
of Empire

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: Theater of National Greatness: The Language of Imperialism  
and the Might of Empire

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





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.