Comment by

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Catherine Hall's important new book does a magnificent job of demonstrating the interlocking but never equal relations of power between Britain and its various colonies. Hall's focus is on Jamaica, though she reminds us, whenever relevant, that the turbulent politics of the West Indies in the mid–nineteenth century cannot be read outside the context of other colonial sites as well as of domestic Britain. And with striking originality, Hall approaches these huge questions through an unusual lens, that of missionary activity in Jamaica, and specifically that of the Birmingham Baptists, who were deeply involved in the fight for the abolition of slavery in the region.

In some respects, the partial emphasis on Birmingham, and on the Birmingham middle classes in particular, returns Hall to some earlier work for which she is justly well-regarded, her coauthored (with Leonore Davidoff) study *Family Fortunes*. But this new volume is no rehash of earlier ideas, and indeed one of its many strengths is its intellectually generous capacity to build on but also to move outward in such innovative ways from that base. For Birmingham in *Civilising Subjects* is only one center, alongside Jamaica, a move that puts the very question of what constitutes a historical center at the heart of the discussion. Hall is clear that Britain, its cities, and its economy do constitute the metropole, but not in any essentialized sense. It is because Britain could name citizen and subject, and because it could capture the deeply gendered trope of "Home" and who belonged there that it could also claim centrality—the power to define, the power to direct. Hall works that claim and the metaphors of home that envelop it brilliantly, drawing out the gendered and raced implications, the power wielded by such naming.

This strategy allows Hall to develop a series of connected concepts that themselves throw up for consideration the defining boundaries of British history. By insisting on the simultaneity of race, gender, class, labor, and religion, Hall forges a framework that complements but often pushes further some of the very best work in this field. Hall shares, for example, Thomas Holt's position that the virulent racism that emerged in the mid–nineteenth century was, as Holt puts it, "a creature of the ostensibly nonracist ideology that had undermined and destroyed slavery."[1] But while Holt's sights remain fixed mostly on Jamaica or on British influences

[1] Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992), p. xx.

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on Jamaica, Hall's point is to look simultaneously at metropolis and colony, not as a simple point of comparison but as shared if unequal sites of empire. In Hall's vision, Birmingham is as influenced by Jamaica as Jamaica is by Birmingham, though the evidence for that claim has clearly to be sought in different avenues.

Structurally, Hall chooses mainly to keep her two principal sites separate. Though there is some inevitable crisscrossing, she mostly divides the book by geography, with Jamaica the focus of one major section of the book—dubbed "Colony and Metropole"—and Birmingham the other, with the emphasis signaled by its title, "Metropolis, Colony and Empire." This ploy allows Hall to explore complex sets of relations, but what if, instead, she had chosen to integrate rather than to juxtapose these two sites? Since the point here is to read Birmingham and Jamaica as coincident rather than as worlds apart, such an alternative would certainly enjoy legitimacy and might further have driven home the point that quite as much connects as separates these two geographies. In many respects, Hall approaches her two sites of investigation quite differently, and our picture of each is inevitably shaped by the methodological choices she has made. We see Birmingham through the eyes of the press, of the active debate-attending public, and civic participation. It is a city, an industrial center, an important environment for nonconformist activism, and a place of increasing economic importance. While it would, of course, be absurd to expect a matching picture of Jamaica, the differences produced by methodology seem to me as palpable as those produced by the clear differences between plantation-dominated Jamaica and industrial Birmingham. The Jamaica presented to the reader is rightly one in which the consequences of emancipation are uppermost, and because we see it principally through the eyes of its Baptist ministers and their families, it is a rural Jamaica we largely encounter in these pages, a place of small villages and lush flora. Yet although Jamaica's towns, as Hall acknowledges, were growing apace in the years after emancipation, we have very little exposure in the book to the life of Kingston and other Jamaican towns. This choice leaves us in a surprisingly literal way with a familiar comparison of metropole and colony: on the one hand is the bustling urban center of Birmingham, and on the other is an entire and yet-to-be-developed colony. And while agriculture still lay at the heart of Jamaica's economy and politics, one wonders what differences between the two sites might have emerged if the focal points had been woven together rather than drawn apart.

While representations of Birmingham presented the city as the very epitome of a progressive, bustling modernity, nineteenth-century Jamaica was frequently seen as an ailing economy, a colony in decline, and this despite the modernizing potentiality claimed for emancipation by many of

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its champions. Hall deftly shows the ways in which abolition was seen as a necessary precursor to modernizing not just Jamaica's economy, but its previously enslaved populace. Indeed, this is the heart of Hall's argument, that the missionary ideal forged in what we might call both an industrialized and a bourgeois Christianity intended to create a population of meek, grateful, compliant, and saved souls, "modern" enough to sustain in a disciplined fashion a wage economy. This assumption of a necessary link between modernity and emancipation provides a critical backdrop for Hall's narrative of Baptist disappointment and also demonstrates the important observation that religion in the nineteenth century was no harbinger of backward-looking conservatism but a critical player in the shaping of modern ideology.

This fascinating brew of religion, political economy, race, and modernization raises the key question of labor, tying it not only to economic issues but critically to religion. Faint echoes of *Family Fortunes* can be heard here in Hall's tying together of the discipline of daily labor and of Christian faith. Ironically, of course, it is the Baptists and other non-Anglican Protestants who profited most from the shift to modernity, moving ever more into the mainstream politics of the metropolis, shifting as Hall puts it (p. 316) from dissent to nonconformity and assuring themselves a central role on Britain's political agenda by midcentury.

But what of the freed slaves whose wage labor was to transform Jamaica's economy from a coercive and immoral center of profit to an acceptable Christian exchange in which the laborer enacted duty, thrift, and hard work daily; appreciated the benefits of consumer durables; and thus sustained the new economy? Missionary disappointment at Afro-Caribbeans' failures to embrace such roles may have differed from Carlylean skepticism about their ability to do so, but as Hall suggests, the otherwise disparate opinions of planters and missionaries nonetheless shared a racial thinking that brought them to ultimately similar conclusions. Modernity, most especially in its imperial garb, was a highly racialized concept, its optimistic focus on progress dependent on ideas about civilization, racial hierarchy, and evolution that could not countenance other cultural forms. Studies of modernity have focused so often on the urban and on urban forms. They have been surprisingly color-blind in their understanding of how such ideas are shaped by race and empire, so Hall's insistence that modernity's form was inescapably linked to hierarchical understandings of race is an important reminder of alternative and deeply material ways of thinking about modernity.

Nineteenth-century notions of modernity were also unequipped to cope with independence in blacks or in women. Independence—standing on one's own feet, being self-supporting and not reliant on the charity of

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others—became the most coveted of qualities for the new manly citizens of imperial Britain, a mark of respectability, reliability, and proper Englishness. It was not, though, a quality or a prize when observed in groups other than white men. When Jamaicans chose petty proprietorship of land over wage labor, or African over Christian forms of worship, they illustrated not admirable self-possession but unmodernity and savagery. When women failed to submit to the authority of men, they likewise were outside modernity and civilization. Hall wisely avoids glib comparisons between the experience of ex-slaves and white women. Still, the ways in which both groups experienced colonial modernity play a key role in her analysis. Yet at times I wanted to know if an even greater connection between these two sets of hierarchies might not be found. In her closing chapter especially, Hall does a wonderful job in exposing the silent racial politics shaping nineteenth-century notions of manliness. Curiously, the women in this study fare less well analytically. The role and position of women—whether the wives, daughters, and sisters of missionaries and abolitionists, or former slaves eking out a living in postemancipation Jamaica—often seem more a background hum than a major theme here. Hall certainly reminds us from time to time of the subordinate but arduous roles demanded of missionary women. The expectations of domesticity that increasingly met black women in the postemancipation era also merit some attention. Yet this remains a relatively underdeveloped theme by contrast with the arguments that link manliness, race, and citizenship together. Hall's choices here raise again a question with which feminist theorists continue to wrestle. Is there a methodology that allows us to see race and gender at work together, and in a way that does not posit one as somehow the leading analytic? Hall's work points, for me, in the right direction, but the methodological and political difficulties remain.

Hall's key argument that conversion required gendered subjects with distinctive familial, political, and economic roles certainly opens the possibility for further research and also acts as a welcome reminder of the importance of religion in the nineteenth century. The missionaries, we should remember, were more than merely disappointed by blacks' reluctance to inhabit an exclusively white theological and social domain. Their most valued belief—that the potential for conversion was universal—was sorely tested not just by "outbreaks" of myalism among black Jamaican Baptists but by a more general frustration at the tenacity of non-British behaviors and customs at variance with Christian practice. Hall's positioning of these missionaries invites a new kind of scholarship around theology, missionary activity, and the role of Christianity in a capitalist and imperialist world. Understanding missionary activity not merely as imperial proselytizing or as the unwelcome thorn in government's side, but

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as a complex practice that embodied many of imperialism's contradictions reworks the field richly.

Missionaries, moreover, were not just God's workers. Many of them lived in Jamaica (and elsewhere) for significant portions of their lives, often spending more of their lives outside rather than inside of Britain. While they seldom if ever ceased to identify with Britain (and in this case, perhaps, with Birmingham), they were nonetheless more than mere visitors, though something less than settlers. Just as the nabobs at whom William Makepeace Thackeray poked such effectively cruel fun in *Vanity Fair* (1848) came back from the subcontinent in some senses "Indianized," missionaries claimed knowledge of and sentiment for the lives they led in Jamaica. Over and over again in the nineteenth century, white colonists complained vociferously of London's arrogance in passing laws affecting parts of the world of which domestic politicians had no knowledge. Strong among those voices of discontent were missionary men and women—and to some extent their claims were not without substance. More than many white colonists, missionaries did in fact work among local populations, often providing critical services that were otherwise, certainly in their Western garb, unavailable to local populations.

Missionaries could certainly speak with some authority of the common diseases in the populations they treated and could witness the consequences of poverty and economic distress close-up. But at the cultural level, their expectations of conformity to a Western behavioral model differed little from the attitudes of white planters who decried their former workforce as lazy, ignorant, and savage.

It comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with the history of colonialism in this region that the evangelicals and the planters, despite their singular political differences, increasingly shared a dim and racist view of Afro-Caribbeans. Where Hall innovates in this respect is in her argument about the differing and often competing forms of Englishness lived in different arenas. The white planters represented a mode of Englishness anathematic to the earnest Baptist missionaries who lived alongside them as English men and women of a very different temperament. In key respects, the planters, hostile to free trade, hostile to free labor, and living a life forged in an earlier era, were representatives of the unmodern, especially for the missionaries for whom emancipation was a step on the road to a Christianized modernity. Though missionaries and planters often shared more attitudes than either group cared to acknowledge, the tensions between them as to how England and Englishness ought to be transmitted and represented to the Afro-Caribbeans of the islands points to the instabilities of colonial rule that are so central to Hall's analysis.

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Hall delves deep into the critically important idea that Englishness was not a fixed point of reference but a contingency over which interested parties fought. This is a hugely important point, one which has only just begun to be satisfactorily theorized—by Hall, and even more recently by Kathleen Wilson writing about an earlier period.[2] I found myself wondering, too, what impact a consideration of the same idea within the African context might have. We know from the plethora of superb work on slavery that slave owners were often careless of or wholly uninterested in the origins of their slaves. In the nineteenth-century Jamaican context, as Hall shows us, missionaries were quick to see what they assumed to be "African" cultural practices in behaviors and customs that they found heathenish and unacceptable. But these, too, we should remember, were inevitably hybrid practices, forged through the bonds of slavery and also through association with indigenous peoples and other migrant groups. Was it the case that hybridity was taken for granted as one of the disadvantages under which former slaves labored, a distinct contrast to the alleged purity of Englishness? Such questions, I would argue, would have been interesting to consider in the context of the arguments at stake here.

For me the mark of a really good book is that while it satisfies intellectually, it also raises many new questions. Hall's book does both of these things, and the issues I have raised here are not in any way intended to suggest that Hall ought to have written a different book (always an absurd claim) but that by raising fresh issues and familiar ones in new guises, she opens up a whole new area of inquiry for those of us who come appreciatively after. Hall's accomplishment is nothing short of authoritative; I would wager that no study of empire, and especially of the British empire, can afford not to consider the kinds of questions she has raised and so originally worked in these pages.

[2] Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York, 2003).

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