

TEACHERS ATTEND WORKSHOP ON COMPARATIVE EMPIRES



Do all roads lead to Rome? When images of President Bush as Roman Emperor appear on magazine covers and book jackets, do we automatically see ourselves as reliving the Roman imperial past? Are there other ways to think about empire? Are all empires alike? What would a comparative approach to empires be? This workshop offered ways to think about empire and empires that might give us a better understanding of our present and our hopes for the future, as well as providing ways to think about the past.

Community College teachers from New England, New Jersey, and Virginia, joined other college and secondary school teachers attending the workshop at Mount Holyoke College on March 9, 2007. The workshop was jointly sponsored by the Community College Humanities Association, the Art Department, Mount Holyoke College, and the Hill Center for World Studies.

Sheldon Pollock, professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Columbia University, started off with basic questions: what is an empire and where did empires come from? Drawing on the work of archaeologists and ancient historians, Pollock introduced the concept of



imitation to report on a scholarly consensus that the earliest imperial form was the Persian Empire in c. 500 BCE. The Persians developed ways to extend rule beyond the local domain, and later societies learned from them. The Romans are the prime historical example, but, said Pollock, Indians too imitated what the Persians had done. Pollock talked about how the two imperial imitations differed. Instead of extending rule by military force, as the Romans did, Indians uprooted local rulers only to “replant” them through diplomatic negotiation, leaving local laws in tact. Indian cultural influence actually

spread to imperial formations in South East Asia, but Indians had no ideology of limitless expansion, while the Romans did. Sanskrit language and literature served as the mediator for the emergence of vernacular literatures in India, in contrast to the Roman practice of imposing Latin and killing off local languages. Finally, Indian rulers did not claim divine sanction for their rule, while the Romans saw themselves as divinely guided, and deified their emperors after death. If we knew about



the Indian version of empire, suggested Pollock, might we not be able to imagine new possibilities for our own future in place of what the Roman paradigm of military aggression and inevitable decline has to offer? The problem is how a non-specialist in Indian studies can make use of such broad comparative statements.



Wondering whether “cosmopolitanism” was a better term than “empire” for what Pollock was talking about, Indira Peterson, professor of Asian Studies, Mount Holyoke College, pointed out that Pollock’s subject matter was literary, not political. She then proposed questions that the inquirer would have to raise in order to make use of literary sources, focusing on what they can tell us and what they can’t tell us. Nicholas Dirks, professor of History and Anthropology and current Vice President for Academic Affairs, Columbia

University, spoke about sources, such as endowments on

temple walls and genealogies, that have only recently been used by historians for the study of political formations in India. He then spoke about interpretation. Inquirers have to be alert to the role that the British played in giving us our view of Indian history. In the case of Vijayanagara (c. 1300-1600), the last large imperial formation in India before the emergence of the Moghul and British Empires, Dirks noted that the British “discovered” Vijayanagara in 1900 and it was they who first called it an empire. Since the British consciously attempted to model themselves on the Roman Empire, they probably had the Roman model in mind when they inscribed imperial identity on Vijayanagara, thus shaping how later generations of Indian and foreign scholars have studied this state.



Given the imbalance of sources for the comparative study of empires in Rome and India, the non-specialist in Indian studies has to be particularly careful in attempting comparison; but caution is also required for the non-specialist approaching the Roman world.

Art historian Bettina Bergmann, Mount Holyoke College, dealt with the paradigmatic role that Rome plays in our imagination by showing an image of Thomas Cole’s 1830s “Course of Empire” series, complete with classicizing monuments. She then turned to the ancient world to ask what happened to Greeks

once they fell under Roman rule, a question Judith Perkins, professor of classics, St.

Joseph College, asked as well. Did they maintain their Greek identity or did they become Romanized? Bergmann used material remains – monuments, sculpture, painting – and Perkins used literary texts from the Second Sophistic (Greek revival movement of the 1st-2nd centuries CE) to point out that scholarly attention today is on local agency and identity formation in the areas over which Rome extended its rule, rather than on what Roman rulers intended or thought they were doing.



What do we learn from examining the comparative approach with Rome and India in mind? In the question period Pollock, citing sociologist Rogers Brubaker as his source, maintained that we all think comparatively; in fact, we can't think without comparison. What we need to do is "disembed" out comparative pairs, ridding ourselves of the normative comparison. We have to learn to think "empire" without automatically and unconsciously thinking "Rome." When we want to think about Rome or India, the workshop

format and handout suggested, our first move should be to look for what contemporary scholars are doing. The handout provided bibliographical information on Rome and Vijayanagar, an empire currently attracting a lot of scholarly attention and easier for non-specialists to approach than is the world of the Sanskrit literary text.

Pictures:

Lisa Connelly Cook, QCC
Sheldon Pollock, Columbia University
Robert Brubaker, Yale University, and Beverly Blois, NVCC
Indira Peterson, Mount Holyoke College
Nicholas Dirks, Columbia University
Bettina Bergmann, Mount Holyoke College
Judith Perkins, Saint Joseph College
Richard Marranta, PCCC

