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Andrew J. Rotter. "Empires of the Senses: How Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching Shaped Imperial Encounters." *Diplomatic History* 35:1 (January 2011): 3-19.

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Review by **Kristin Hoganson**, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Andrew Rotter's presidential address did what a good presidential address should do: it stimulated its initial audience so thoroughly that nobody fell asleep at lunch. Now, in its published form, it continues to challenge our thinking and prod us to consider new approaches. Its first claim is only implicit, but important nonetheless: imperial encounters matter in our larger efforts to understand U.S. foreign relations. The second claim is more provocative: our understandings of empire – and perhaps other foreign relations topics as well – should be more embodied. That is, to more fully grasp the experience, and indeed, the politics of empire, we need to understand how it was apprehended. Not just abstractly, or second-handedly, but personally, physically, sensorily. And not just through vision, but through hearing, smell, taste, and touch.

In making his case for the five senses, Rotter speaks to the growing interest in material culture and visual representation in empire studies. A leading example of this vein of scholarship is David Brody's *Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism and Imperialism in the Philippines* (2010). Among other things, Brody suggests that the imperial issues that received considerable attention in the United States were those that lent themselves to visual treatment.¹ Rotter expands on such work by emphasizing the theme of perception and by placing the other senses alongside sight.

¹ David Brody, *Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism and Imperialism in the Philippines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Some further examples of cultures of U.S. imperialism scholarship that emphasizes visual representation are: Alexander Missal, *Seaway to the Future: American Social Visions and the Construction of the Panama Canal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

Rotter has mustered a number of examples to illustrate his point that all the senses registered stimuli in Indian and Philippine imperial encounters. He convincingly shows that sight alone did not determine imperial assessments, that the sound of ringing bells, the smell of latrines, the flavor of curry, and the feel of foreign pulses also shaped consciousness in imperial contexts. Yet in so doing, he raises questions about the relative significance of each sense. Even if we accept the reasonable premise that all five senses came in to play in these two sets of imperial encounters (and presumably, in the lives of mobile Indians and Filipinos), the question remains: did images travel more readily than sounds and smells and hence play a relatively greater role in shaping perceptions of empire, at least among distant policymakers and publics?

Even as he pushes us to think beyond visual awareness to the multi-sensed bases of human experience, Rotter speaks to the big “so what” question by insisting that the senses are not his “subject” but his “methodology.” [5] In other words, they are not so much noteworthy for their own sake as for what they can tell us about the ways that “empire functioned, or did not, and especially how it came to an end.” [5] Let us look at each of these issues – function and ending – in turn.

To a certain degree, adding the senses just fleshes out (so to speak) some of the historical themes we are already familiar with. It can help us understand perceptions of racial, class, gender, national, and other forms of difference. In a similar vein, it can help us understand the civilizing impulse and what that implied: not just soap and schools, but specific scents (or lack thereof) and speech inflections. Social engineering takes on new dimensions when approached via the senses – it becomes a matter of aesthetics and other sensory standards as well as of health and policing. As it engages senses and sensibilities alike, Rotter’s address draws our attention to the significance of manners – with their emphasis on sensory regulation -- in imperial encounters. It also turns our thoughts to emotional states, affect, nostalgia, and memory, all of them greatly influenced by the senses.

As part of his effort to connect sensory experience to power and politics, Rotter presents it as a matter of contention. His examples add to the claims that sensory perception was never strictly biological – that cultural conditioning played a major role in shaping the reception of stimuli. Rotter finds that conflicts emerged from efforts to change specific stimuli and from attempts to alter the relative importance placed on each sense. Part of the civilizing mission, he finds, was to put the senses “in the right order of priority.” [5] These observations on competing sensory appraisals and hierarchies are intriguing but sketchy. I look forward to Rotter’s further findings on cross-cultural struggles over the politics of perception.

2001); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

One of the things that particularly fascinated me about the address was the extent to which other forms of knowing kept slipping in alongside sensory perception. This can be seen, for example, in Rotter's discussion of unwholesome foods. It seems that the problem with these was not taste, appearance, odor, or their feel on the tongue (much less their sound), but rather, something unperceptible, like their chemical properties. Ditto for the pathogens and pollutants that were feared all the more because they couldn't be detected without special sense-enhancing equipment. Such examples suggest that imperial agents sometimes struggled to transcend their senses, to reinforce difference and hierarchy *despite* what their senses were (or were not) telling them. Such examples thus hint at another form of sensory politics: that of the relation between perception, reason, and intuition, including understandings of who could claim mastery of each of these variously valued cognitive forms. As Rotter continues to build his case for the political significance of perception and its relation to other struggles – such as anticolonial nationalism – these other ways of knowing surely merit mention.

Something else that merits more attention is the selective registry of sensory experience. Where are the accounts describing the smell of bodies dumped into mass graves for burial, the feelings of pain stemming from bullets and rifle butts, the taste of hunger among dislocated people, the sounds of people subjected to the water cure? Rotter's address prompts questions about which sensory experiences were repressed and which were most effectively marshaled for political ends.

This brings us to Rotter's second big claim: that sensitivity to the senses can help us understand how empires ended. Although those looking for a sense-based explanation of decolonization should wait for subsequent drafts of what Rotter admits are some preliminary findings, the address does suggest a certain trajectory in the sensory history of empire, characterized by a general shift from repulsion to attraction. To be fair, Rotter does make nods to things like sexual pleasure and gustatory gratification, but the general narrative he sketches out is one of remaking the sensory landscape of India and the Philippines to fit more with elite British and U.S. standards.

This emphasis on endings begs the question: why were the British and the Americans so interested in India and the Philippines in the first place? Can the senses help answer that? Ronald Hyam's *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (1990) found that the answer is yes, that the empire was acquired not so much in an absence of mind as in a fit of lust.² Writings on commodity chains and material culture – including those on the spice and China trades – also suggest that the senses have at least as much bearing on imperialist impulses as on imperial endings. Whereas many of the sensory experiences that Rotter references were construed less than positively, other sensory experiences were more delightful, and some had considerable market value.

² Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

In addition to suggesting ways that sensual fantasies helped give rise to empire, the growing literature on commodification, commercialization, and tourism adds to Rotter's final point – one that I think could be played up more – that imperial encounters occurred not only in India and the Philippines, but in Britain and the United States, and countless other locations besides. Parade grounds and medical clinics are not the only places to look for changing sensory environments -- so are zoos, circuses, world's fairs, museums, department stores, parlors, botanical gardens, grocery stores, church suppers, and the like. One of the findings of this literature is that commodified sensory experiences circulated across empires as well as within them, seen, for example, in the popularity of curry in the late nineteenth-century United States.³

In sum, the story that Rotter is uncovering is one of widening sensory options for the privileged as much as it is one of homogenizing sensory environments in some colonized spaces. As such, his address speaks to contemporary debates over the implications of globalization for diversity and difference. And as such, it suggests that to speak of imperial endings is premature, for we can still catch whiffs of empire today.

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³ See, for example, Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).