Empire Considered

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Abstract

This article reassesses the British Empire, highlighting its cultural, linguistic, and political impact, and its role in shaping modern globalization. It explores both formal and informal imperial influence, retraces the transition of global power to the U.S., and challenges simplified or one-sided critiques of empire. Emphasizing cooperation alongside coercion, it argues that empire was complex, multifaceted, and not uniquely Western. Post-colonial instability and authoritarianism are examined as legacies, urging a more contextual understanding of imperialism and its place in world history.

Empire and the imperial experience are at the close as much about the impact on other peoples as that on Britain. Manifestations range from the trivial to the more profound; the former including hobbies and foodstuffs, whether playing cricket in the Ionian Islands, or drinking gin on Minorca. Most of the legacy of imperial products is long forgotten, however, for example Craven Empire De Luxe Mixture Tobacco, which was advertised with the picture of a serviceman[1].

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[1] «Daily Telegraph», 7 August 1945.

The more profound effects of the British empire vary. They include the spread of English, major and lasting demographic movements, and the creation of states. The growth of English as the global language of business and of international political and cultural links has been of key importance in global integration, and has also helped disseminate not only English-language culture, but also political, economic and social suppositions. This owed much to British imperial rule, especially in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

The impact of language is one also of the many ways in which it is appropriate to think of a symbiotic transfer of imperial hegemony from Britain to America. Symbiosis and transfer do not, however, mean sameness. Whereas much of the spread of the English language prior to the mid-twentieth century arose as a result of territorial control, and its impact on government and education, since then, under American influence and, to a degree, hegemony, this spread has largely been due to economic advantage outside the context of any such control.

However, in the case of the British empire, it is repeatedly difficult to differentiate between the impact of empire, in the shape of territorial control, and that of external influence during the period of imperial dominance. The latter would have been profound without formal control, as the role of America today indicates. To use informal empire as a term to describe this is not without considerable value. Yet, aside from the somewhat elastic, if not, at times, nebulous and rhetorical meaning and application, there is a problem that the idea focuses on one power, rather than the range of external influences that might well exist in specific terms.

Thus, for example, while Britain was the most important external force commercially in China in the 1920s, and was dominant in Chinese external and coastal shipping, it was not the sole non-Chinese power wielding influence and also able to apply pressure. So, also, with Britain's Atlantic economy. Britain was not the sole power drawing on the value of Atlantic trade (including the slave trade) nor of the gains to be gained from controlling New World hinterlands. The latter were a major source of prosperity, providing good soils and weaker Native opposition than was the case for China in its relationship with its landward hinterland. This contrast was important to British success but it is always necessary to avoid monocausal explanations, and, indeed descriptions; and, as already noted, Britain was not alone.

Now, in contrast, it is China that is influential and not least in the former British empire where, to a degree, it is competing well in the struggle for post-imperial influence, if not "control", and dong well in, for example, Myanmar, Pakistan and the Solomon Islands. In the former British Caribbean, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, and Trinidad and Tobago signed up to China's Belt and Road infrastructure initiative in 2018, and Barbados, Jamaica and Guyana in 2019.

More generally, a revision of our understanding of the British empire is an aspect of the reconsideration of global history. Thus, the misleading «Military Revolution» account of the rise of the global military power of European powers that this has led to a relative neglect of the continued strength of Asian powers in the period 1500-1750. In particular, there is a highly misleading tendency to read the outcomes of the late nineteenth century back into the earlier period[2]. A revision of this account leads to a more convincing presentation of European imperial power as syncretic. The dependence of Europeans on others, albeit in very different contexts, emerges as central in the discussion of the period 1500-1800. Indeed, the slave trade and its wrenching and miserable power relationship confirms this picture, an insight that deserves more attention given the significance of this trade for the assessment of empire.

In the nineteenth century, the military decline of China and the Ottomans should be traced in terms of deep underlying domestic political and fiscal factors rather than any technological triumphalism of Western militarism: non-military technology, politics, and logistics were more important in the nineteenth century than more advanced weapons. Related to this, care is needed before adopting survival-of-the-fittest interpretations of international security competition, interpretations that have often been employed in a somewhat glib fashion.

The fall of European empires in the twentieth century can be brought in by suggesting that the role of the declining legitimacy of empires reinforces the earlier conclusion about the importance of culture and ideas in the making and remaking of the international system as distinct from the rational pursuit of power and wealth and the use of technology. In so far as there is a current return to a multipolar global international order in which Asian states play a major role, the context will of course be very different to 1700. Yet again, caveats about such a return can be offered from

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[2] J. Black, *Beyond the Military Revolution. War in the Seventeenth Century World*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2011.

the empirical – for example India, as the core element of Britain's Asian empire, was a key part of that order until 1947, to the conceptual in terms of the changing nature of power, not least with reference to less disparate fiscal and information systems that are aligned on the global level by commercial links[3]. Formal or informal, pragmatic cooperation, within and between empires[4], was both goal and means to a greater extent than is often appreciated. There were quasi-contracts between the metropolitan government and its colonists, but with politics and ideologies aspects of the relationships[5]. Pragmatic cooperation remained the situation in 1815-1939 when Britain was not only the leading naval power but also the dominant empire across much of the globe. This was the period of the onset of modernity, as defined by such criteria as large-scale industrialisation, urbanisation, and the spread of literacy.

The pressures and problems stemming from this process of modernisation, notably under the strain of war, could be accentuated by foreign rule (whether transoceanic or within the West), but this rule was not the root cause of change. This is not a welcoming reflection for many, not only because it challenges the facile habit of blaming outsiders for unwelcome developments, but also because this approach questions the ability of post-imperial regimes to cope with the continued effects of globalisation.

If the British empire is blamed for many of the aspects of modernisation and globalisation, it also serves as a way of offering historical depth to a critique of American power; and, in part, this is at issue when British imperialism is criticised. As with the British, particularly in the nineteenth century, American global policy developed with a pursuit of liberal morality linked to the furtherance of imperial goals[6]. There was a quest for an open world, in the shape of free trade and the unfettered movement of money, and a confidence that technology endorses as much as it underlines a privileged position in the international order. The power of the British and American empires can be presented in instrumental terms, as protection systems for economic practices.

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[3] J.G. Sharman, *Empires of the Weak. The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 2019.

[4] M. Thomas and R. Toye, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

[5] J. Peacey (ed.), *Making the British Empire, 1660-1800*, Manchester University Press, 2020.

[6] K. Burk, *The Lion and the Eagle. The Interactions of the British and American Empires, 1783-1972*, Bloomsbury, London 2018.

However, for both Britain and America, the idea of empire included the pursuit of a benign and mutually-beneficial world order, and, in each case, there was a willingness to use major efforts to engage with rival empires that were also, correctly, seen as tyrannies: Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, and World War Two Japan. Imperial history involved rivalry and competition between empires alongside a measure of alliance and co-operation, as in those conflicts. Turning to the level of the imperial government and of local élites and populations within particular parts of empire, co-operation could be far more important than the question of the formal domestic character of this government, in so far as these were different. It is instructive that there has been a change in emphasis from the international competition to domestic nature in the modern discussion of empire, as well as from power to culture. This may be an aspect of an intellectual presentism that is misleading as a guide to the past, although cultural elements are part of the practices and politics of co-operation that were important to successful imperial governance.

Nevertheless, the terms of the mutual benefit offered by the British and American empires were unwelcome to many, more particularly in the British case as its empire rested more clearly on conquest, control, constraint and coercion. In contrast, there was a democratic objective at the heart of American capitalism that was seen as in America's and the world's interest, and that helped foster American opposition to the European colonial empires, notably that of Britain[7]. The Americans hoped that newly-independent peoples would support democratic capitalism and thus look to America. They wanted an empire by invitation[8], which, however, raised the questions, as in Latin America, of "whose invitation?" and "by how secured?".

If the British empire is both alien and redundant from this perspective (and, as a minor echo, British accents and actors seemed obvious trademarks of villainy through the democratising lens of Hollywood), that has not prevented a conflation of British and American imperialism in some quarters. This offers another way in which the experience of British rule can be seen as unwelcome. More generally, criticism, if not caricature, of

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[7] A.G. Hopkins, *American Empire. A Global History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2018; S. Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World. The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2020.

[8] G. Lundestad, *Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952*, «Journal of Peace Research», 23 (1986), pp. 263-277.

the British empire are freely offered, and few defenders are to be seen, in Britain or elsewhere.

This criticism would be more impressive if it could be shown that the British were worse than other imperialists. Although it was not alone in being seaborne, the seaborne character, global range and, association with particular commercial, and, eventually, industrial developments, of the British empires over the last half-millennium, gave it a particular character. Yet, the British scarcely invented long-distance commerce, enslavement, war, external rule and racism.

Instead, imperial pretensions and power, not self-determination, were the norm, and still are in parts of the world such as Tibet and Xinkiang, both still under Chinese control as they have been from the eighteenth century. In place of the North-West Frontier of British India, there is the North-West Frontier of modern India, with Kashmir occupied by large numbers of Indian troops and paramilitaries, and in 2019 the constitutional provisions giving the majority-Muslim region a degree of autonomy removed, while the federal government also replaced the status of Kashmir, Ladakh and Jammu as a status with that of two territories ruled directly by Delhi. Moreover, Hindu settlement has been encouraged, which raises the issue of settler colonisation.

Furthermore, «the underlying centrality of slavery in the historical relationship between Egypt and the Sudan» was such that anti-colonial nationalism in Egypt was fully compatible with a determination to regain power over Sudan[9], as in Nokrashy Pasha's speech in the Egyptian Senate in August 1945 in favour of Egyptian independence. Indeed, the national projects of former colonies notably Africanisation policies of Kenya and Uganda, the Arabisation ones of Egypt, and the Malayanisation and other counterparts, all had had brutal consequences for many; and, as a result, cast a more positive light on the polyglot nature of British imperialism.

At this level of abstraction, it can be too easy to forget that people were involved in making empire and in the web of connections and relationships that sustained it. At the time, their reputation could be very mixed, as with Robert Clive, Warren Hastings and Cecil Rhodes, and modern discussion of all three in part has echoes of contemporary debate. And so for many who have been largely forgotten. Frederic Shelford, the consulting engineer to the Crown Agents for the West African Railways, was crit-

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[9] E.M.T. Powell, *Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA 2003, quote p. 219.

icised in 1904 by name and at length in Parliament by Newton, 6th Earl of Portsmouth for incompetence if not corruption. Crucially, Shelford's father-in-law was Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office. British commentators presented their colonial administrators as opposed to indigenous corruption, but there was much corruption in this administration[10].

If the British empire is central to much of world history over the last four centuries, that was in part because its character stemmed from all the peoples and countries that were affected, including not only colonial subjects, but also other expansionist powers, both Western and non-Western. The interrelationships were multifocal and far from unidirectional. Indeed, it is a mistake to present England/Britain as necessarily the main player in the developments from which it profited. For example, the struggle between England and the Dutch in 1652-74 was central to the English/British dominance of the "Middle Colonies" of North America until 1775. However, Dutch failure in this struggle was in part due to the earlier Dutch mid-seventeenth century defeat by Portugal in the South and Mid-Atlantic notably in Brazil, but also in Atlantic Africa. This exemplifies the extent to which it is not always clear what is an expansionist power, for the same state might be such in one area but not in another.

The mistaken assumption that Western powers were the ones responsible, only or largely, for imperialism and supposedly related crimes such as enslavement is underlined by the case of the Pacific, which tends to receive less attention than is merited in the discussion of British imperialism. For example, the Chatham Islands were invaded by Māori from New Zealand in 1835. To blame this expansionism solely on guns obtained by trade with Europeans is in part to make the means the cause. Instead, there was the migration and movement of Māori tribes to avoid attacks by neighbours with muskets. Rather than a deliberate conquest, the tribes Ngati Tama and Ngati Mutunga escaped to the Chathams as a safe refuge. But after initial good relations with the Moriori people, Polynesians of Māori descent, who had settled in about 1500, misunderstandings multiplied and the newcomers brutally attacked the Moriori, who were pacifists. They were largely slaughtered, with the survivors enslaved. There could have been 1,600 of them in 1800 and they were reduced to only 100. In 1842,

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[10] J. Saha, *Law, Disorder and the Colonial State. Corruption in Burma c.1900*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013; R. Kroeze, P. Dalmau, F. Monier (eds.), *Corruption, Empire and Colonialism in the Modern Era. A Global Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2021.

the islands officially became part of the colony of New Zealand and, in 1863, the enslaved were freed by the resident magistrate.

In Fiji, British influence, and then control, was welcome locally not only as a way to limit American pressure, but also to deter Tongan expansionism, as well as to ensure order within Fiji. The annexation of Fiji in 1874 in part reflected a parliamentary campaign pressing for it as a means to end slavery. This, plus the Pacific Islanders Protection Act of 1872 and the establishment of the Western Pacific High Commission in 1877, were regarded as ways to protect the indigenous people. Charles Morris Woodford, a naturalist who learned local languages, became the first Resident Commissioner of the Solomon Islands Protectorate, serving from 1896 until 1914 and trying, with few resources, mostly Fijian policemen and episodic help from the Royal Navy, to stop headhunting, fight smallpox, support Anglican missionaries, and create a civil administration.

The contrast between lines of imperial control on the map and small administrations was more generally apparent. Even if willing, colonial administrations were not in a good position to regulate commercial companies. Instead, they tended to share power, with the companies, as with the British on the Solomons, and/or with existing chiefs, as with the British on Fiji, and also with the local representatives of the Western military.

Such co-operation and protection, nevertheless, was on terms. Taxation for example could force islanders into wage labour. Partly as a result, islanders worked as indentured labour, for example in Queensland, labour that was voluntary, but could involve coercion and/or deceit.

Meanwhile, in North America, the Native Americans did very badly in the United States when the protective presence of the British Crown was removed. Differently, in Canada, the position of the First Nations deteriorated with Canadian nationhood, as government regulation was established and enforced, notably by the Indian Acts of 1876, 1880, and 1884. In 1884, the *potlatch* ceremony, central to the coastal cultures, was banned, a measure not reversed until 1960. Tribal governance was overthrown, resources seized, and British/Canadian/settler/White (the choice of adjective is instructive) systems of marriage, parenthood and land tenure all enforced. Reserves were regulated by the Department of Indian Affairs. As in Australia, indigenous children were forced into residential schools in order to break traditional links, while indigenous communities were

sometimes moved. There was no right to vote in federal elections until 1960.

In many countries, the end of British rule or influence was frequently followed not by democracy but by the interplay and impact of international geopolitical competition and, on the national level, the entrenchment of one-faction governmental systems. These were often authoritarian.

In Egypt, the republican coup in 1952 was followed in 1953 by an abolition of democracy, in the shape of the 1923 liberal constitution, and of political parties, and by the harsh treatment of rivals by special tribunals. Charges of treason were widely distributed as the military seized total control, which it used to its own profit. Meanwhile, the state socialism followed by the Egyptian government did not produce significant economic improvement. Religious and ethnic minorities were badly treated.

Moreover, as in Burma/Myanmar from the late 1940s and in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, post-imperial systems could be very violent toward particular groups. Nigeria became an envelopment for Hausa control, and the Igibo suffered very greatly in the Biafran War of 1967-70. Moreover, post-British rule was frequently unstable. Coups included in Pakistan in 1958, 1971, 1977, and 1999, Ghana in 1966, 1972, 1978, 1979 and 1981, Sierra Leone in 1967 and 1997, Nigeria in 1966, 1985 and 1993, and Grenada in 1979 and 1983. Since independence in 1956, Sudan has had 19 coup attempts, 7 of them successful. Unsuccessful coups included Pakistan in 1951, 1973, 1980, 1984 and 1995, Ghana in 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, and 1987, Gambia in 1981 and Nigeria in 1990.

The limited extent of popular support for national government in the post-imperial Middle East was to be suggested in the "Arab Springs" of the 2010s and 2020s, while civil wars in Sudan in 1955 to 1972, 1983 to 2005, 2003 to 2020, and 2023 to the present, were scarcely an advertisement for the end of the British empire. The glumness of the present, which includes Russian imperialism in Ukraine and Chinese informal empire, does not excuse the harshness and problems of past imperialism, British and other. Nevertheless, the present situation should possibly encourage an assessment that is more alive to the contexts and character both of that imperialism and of the modern world.